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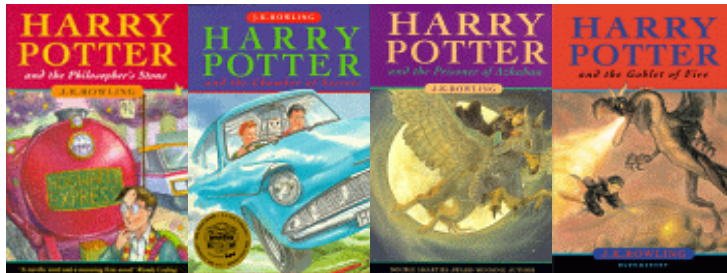
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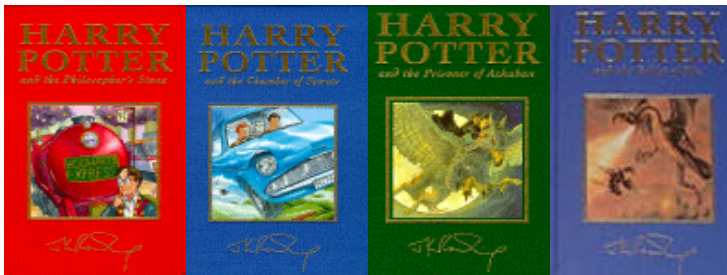
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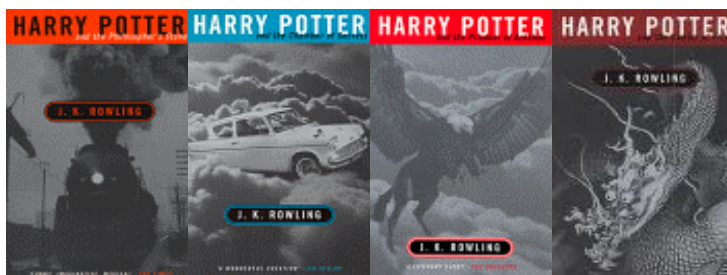
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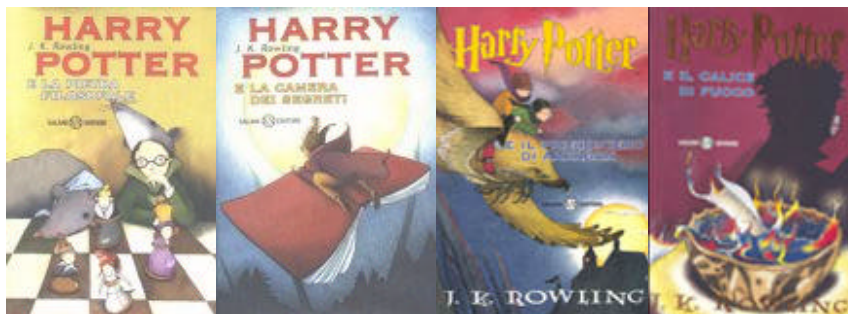
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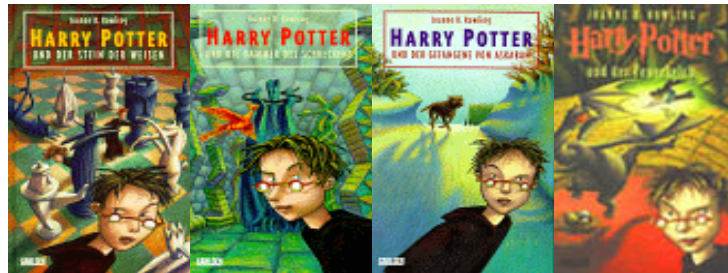
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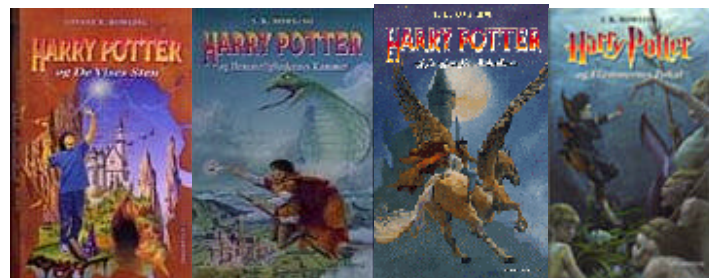
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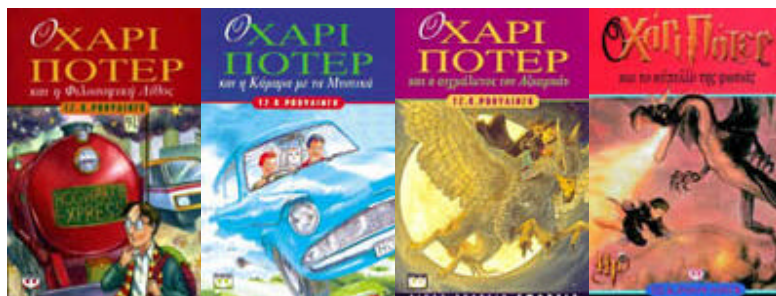
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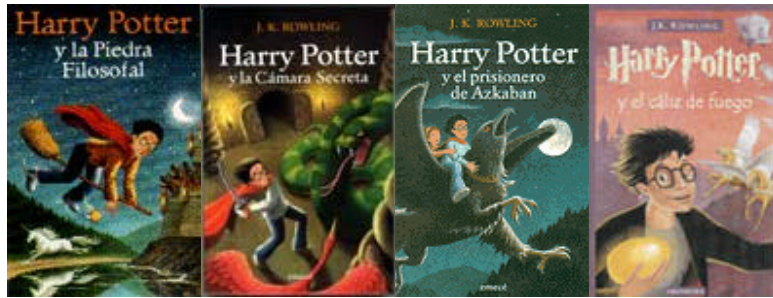
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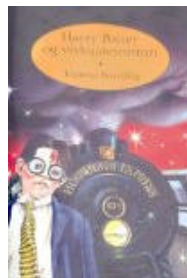
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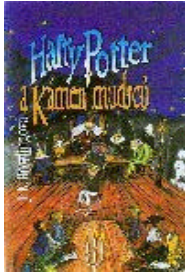
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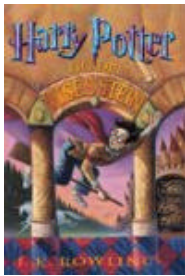
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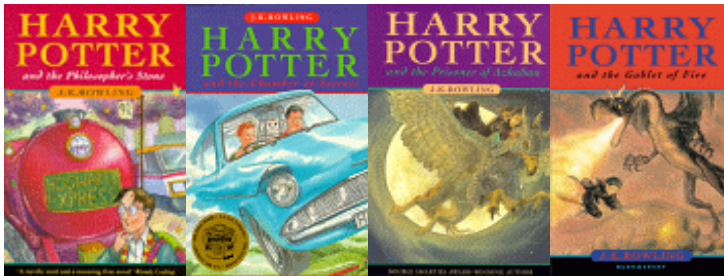
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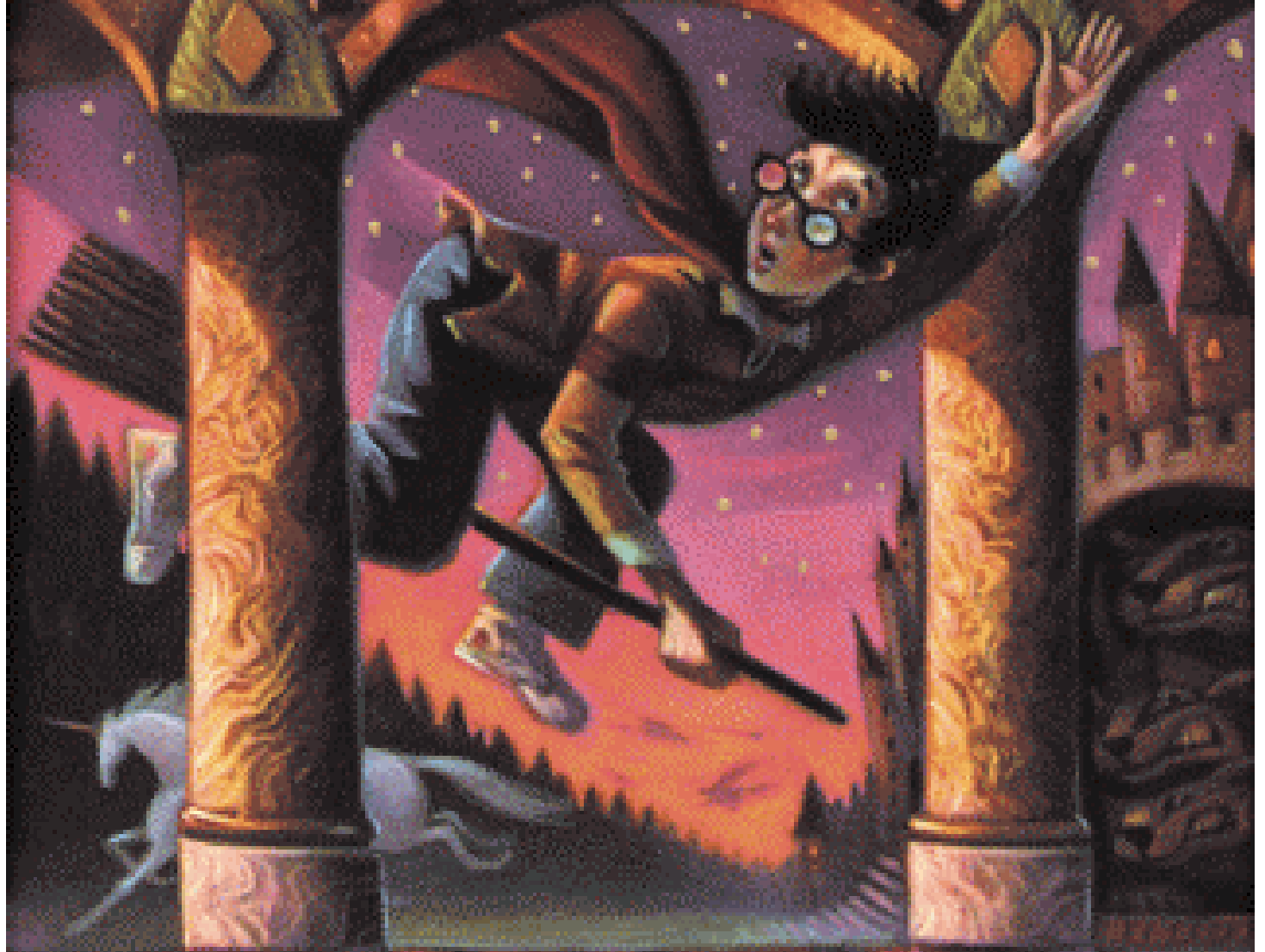
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Harry Potter

AND THE SORCERER'S STONE



J. K. ROWLING

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOY WHO LIVED

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. The Dursleys shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street. The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son, too, but they had never even seen him. This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away; they didn't want Dudley mixing with a child like that.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country. Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair.

None of them noticed a large, tawny owl flutter past the window.

At half past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek, and tried to kiss Dudley good-bye but missed,

because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls. "Little tyke," chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four's drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar -- a cat reading a map. For a second, Mr. Dursley didn't realize what he had seen -- then he jerked his head around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Privet Drive, but there wasn't a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light. Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in his mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Privet Drive -- no, looking at the sign; cats couldn't read maps or signs. Mr. Dursley gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day.

But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam, he couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes -- the getups you saw on young people! He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a huddle of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald-green cloak! The nerve of him! But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt -- these people were obviously collecting for something... yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on and a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor. If he hadn't, he might have found it harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl even at nighttime. Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people. He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more. He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This bunch were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin. It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard yes, their son, Harry"

Mr. Dursley stopped dead. Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as if he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him, seized his telephone, and had almost finished dialing his home number when he changed his mind. He put the receiver back down and stroked his mustache, thinking... no, he was being stupid. Potter wasn't such an unusual name. He was sure there were lots of people called Potter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold. There was no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset at any mention of her sister. He didn't blame her -- if he'd had a sister like that... but all the same, those people in cloaks...

He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone just outside the door.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping

he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw -- and it didn't improve his mood -- was the tabby cat he'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings around its eyes.

"Shoo!" said Mr. Dursley loudly. The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look. Was this normal cat behavior? Mr. Dursley wondered. Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Mrs. Dursley had had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner all about Mrs. Next Door's problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word ("Won't!"). Mr. Dursley tried to act normally. When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:

"And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern." The newscaster allowed himself a grin. "Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim McGuffin with the weather. Going to be any more showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today. Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars! Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early -- it's not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair. Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? Mysterious people in cloaks all over the place? And a whisper, a whisper about the Potters...

Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Er -- Petunia, dear -- you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

"Funny stuff on the news," Mr. Dursley mumbled. "Owls... shooting stars... and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today..."

"So?" snapped Mrs. Dursley.

"Well, I just thought... maybe... it was something to do with... you know... her crowd."

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips. Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he'd heard the name "Potter." He decided he didn't dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, "Their son -- he'd be about Dudley's age now, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

"What's his name again? Howard, isn't it?"

"Harry. Nasty, common name, if you ask me."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. "Yes, I quite agree."

He didn't say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it were waiting for something.

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did... if it got out that they were related to a pair of -- well, he didn't think he could bear it.

The Dursleys got into bed. Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought before he fell asleep was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs. Dursley. The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about

them and their kind.... He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on -- he yawned and turned over -- it couldn't affect them....

How very wrong he was.

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness. It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed on the next street, nor when two owls swooped overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground. The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him. He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

He found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter. He flicked it open, held it up in the air, and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop. He clicked it again -- the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outer, until the only lights left on the whole street were two tiny pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him. If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn't be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement. Dumbledore slipped the Put-Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street toward number four, where he sat down

on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I 've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no -- even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the Dursleys' dark living-room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls... shooting stars.... Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent -- I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. He never had much sense."

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. "We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day YouKnow-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he

really has gone, Dumbledore?"

"It certainly seems so," said Dumbledore. "We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"A what?"

"A lemon drop. They're a kind of Muggle sweet I'm rather fond of"

"No, thank you," said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn't think this was the moment for lemon drops. "As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone -"

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense -- for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort." Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dumbledore, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice. "It all gets so confusing if we keep saying 'You-Know-Who.' I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name.

"I know you haven't, said Professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. "But you're different. Everyone knows you're the only one You-Know- oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of."

"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort had powers I will never have."

"Only because you're too -- well -- noble to use them."

"It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs."

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, "The owls are nothing next to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone's saying? About why he's disappeared? About what finally stopped him?"

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she did now. It was plain that whatever "everyone" was saying, she was not going to believe it until

Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore, however, was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

"What they're saying," she pressed on, "is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric's Hollow. He went to find the Potters. The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are -- are -- that they're -- dead. "

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"Lily and James... I can't believe it... I didn't want to believe it... Oh, Albus..."

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. "I know... I know..." he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on. "That's not all. They're saying he tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry. But -- he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke -- and that's why he's gone.

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's -- it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done... all the people he's killed... he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding... of all the things to stop him... but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles. Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge. It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean -- you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore -- you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son -- I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous -- a legend -- I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future -- there will be books written about Harry -- every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, "Yes -- yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?" She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it -- wise -- to trust Hagrid with something as important as this?"

"I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, "but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to -- what was that?"

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a

headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky -- and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild - long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. "At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?"

"Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir," said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I've got him, sir."

"No problems, were there?"

"No, sir -- house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin' around. He fell asleep as we was flyin' over Bristol."

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

"Is that where -?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever."

"Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. Well -- give him here, Hagrid -- we'd better get this over with."

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursleys' house.

"Could I -- could I say good-bye to him, sir?" asked Hagrid. He bent his

great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

"Shhh!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "you'll wake the Muggles!"

"S-s-sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it -- Lily an' James dead -- an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles -"

"Yes, yes, it's all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we'll be found," Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out.

"Well," said Dumbledore finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

"Yeah," said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, "I'll be takin' Sirius his bike back. G'night, Professor McGonagall -- Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorcycle and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once, and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so that Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street. He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

"Good luck, Harry," he murmured. He turned on his heel and with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley... He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter -- the boy who lived!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE VANISHING GLASS

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room, which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls. Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets -- but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

"Up! Get up! Now!"

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

"Up!" she screeched. Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove. He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a

good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it. He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before.

His aunt was back outside the door.

"Are you up yet?" she demanded.

"Nearly," said Harry.

"Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don't you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy's birthday."

Harry groaned.

"What did you say?" his aunt snapped through the door.

"Nothing, nothing..."

Dudley's birthday -- how could he have forgotten? Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley's birthday presents. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise -- unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley's favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn't often catch him. Harry didn't look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt

Petunia was how he had gotten it.

"In the car crash when your parents died," she had said. "And don't ask questions."

Don't ask questions -- that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

"Comb your hair!" he barked, by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put

together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way -- all over the place.

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel -- Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Harry put the plates of egg and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn't much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

"Thirty-six," he said, looking up at his mother and father. "That's two less than last year."

"Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy."

"All right, thirty-seven then," said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, "And we'll buy you another two presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that all right"

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, "So I'll have thirty ... thirty..."

"Thirty-nine, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia.

"Oh." Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. "All right then."

Uncle Vernon chuckled. "Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" He ruffled Dudley's hair.

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR. He was ripping the paper off a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

"Bad news, Vernon," she said. "Mrs. Figg's broken her leg. She can't take him." She jerked her head in Harry's direction.

Dudley's mouth fell open in horror, but Harry's heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley's birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned.

"Now what?" said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he'd planned this. Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn't easy when he reminded himself it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbles, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

"We could phone Marge," Uncle Vernon suggested.

"Don't be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy."

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn't there -- or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug.

"What about what's-her-name, your friend -- Yvonne?"

"On vacation in Majorca," snapped Aunt Petunia.

"You could just leave me here," Harry put in hopefully (he'd be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley's computer).

Aunt Petunia looked as though she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"And come back and find the house in ruins?" she snarled.

"I won't blow up the house," said Harry, but they weren't listening.

"I suppose we could take him to the zoo," said Aunt Petunia slowly, "... and leave him in the car...."

"That car's new, he's not sitting in it alone...."

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn't really crying -- it had been years since he'd really cried -- but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

"Dinky Duddydums, don't cry, Mummy won't let him spoil your special day!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

"I... don't... want... him... t-t-to come!" Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. "He always sp- spoils everything!" He shot Harry a nasty grin through the gap in his mother's arms.

Just then, the doorbell rang -- "Oh, good Lord, they're here!" said Aunt Petunia frantically -- and a moment later, Dudley's best friend, Piers Polkiss, walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people's arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once.

Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn't believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys' car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life. His aunt and uncle hadn't been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they'd left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

"I'm warning you," he had said, putting his large purple face right up

close to Harry's, "I'm warning you now, boy -- any funny business, anything at all -- and you'll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas."

"I'm not going to do anything," said Harry, "honestly..

But Uncle Vernon didn't believe him. No one ever did.

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn't make them happen.

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left "to hide that horrible scar." Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry, who spent a sleepless night imagining school the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses. Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off. He had been given a week in his cupboard for this, even though he had tried to explain that he couldn't explain how it had grown back so quickly.

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls) -- The harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry. Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much to Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney. The Dursleys had received a very angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them Harry had been climbing school buildings. But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trash cans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him in mid-jump.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong. It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects. This morning, it was motorcycles.

"... roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums," he said, as a motorcycle overtook them.

I had a dream about a motorcycle," said Harry, remembering suddenly. "It was flying."

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: "MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!"

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

I know they don't," said Harry. "It was only a dream."

But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon -- they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop. It wasn't bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn't blond.

Harry had the best morning he'd had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn't have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can -- but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself -- no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:

"I get that all the time.

"I know," Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could hear him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake nodded vigorously.

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry asked.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

"Was it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on: This specimen was bred in the zoo. "Oh, I see -- so you've never been to Brazil?"

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of them jump.

"DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened -- one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, "Brazil, here I come.... Thanksss, amigo."

The keeper of the reptile house was in shock.

"But the glass," he kept saying, "where did the glass go?"

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn't done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon's car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg, while Piers was swearing it had tried to squeeze him to death. But worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, "Harry was talking to it, weren't you, Harry?"

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house before starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, "Go -- cupboard -- stay -- no meals," before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn't know what time it was and he couldn't be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn't risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

He'd lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he'd been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn't remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burning pain on his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from. He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family. Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top hat had bowed to him once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man, Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a

closer look.

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LETTERS FROM NO ONE

The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"

"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick." Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats,

and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.

"Your new school uniform," she said.

Harry looked in the bowl again.

"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet."

"DotA be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished."

Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere,

on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.

"Make Harry get it."

"Get the mail, Harry."

"Make Dudley get it."

"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley."

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. --."

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

"I want to read that letter," he said loudly. "I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine."

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn't move.

"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.

"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.

"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.

"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"

"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.

"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want --"

Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer... Yes, that's best... we won't do anything...."

"But --"

"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"

That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"

"No one. it was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it."

"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it."

"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking... you're really getting a bit big for it... we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.

"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now."

The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, "I don't want him in there... I need that room... make him get out...."

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was

thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive --'"

With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go."

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap.

Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.

I want --" he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes. Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up."

"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon."

"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today --"

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty

letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one.

"Out! OUT!"

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffing in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while. "Shake'em off... shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.

They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering....

They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

"Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred

of these at the front desk."

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:

Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.

"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"

It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second

room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.

Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.

Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds... twenty ... ten... nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three... two... one...

BOOM.

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KEEPER OF THE KEYS

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake. "Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands -- now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"

There was a pause. Then --

SMASH!

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey..."

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yet dad, but yeh've got yet mom's eyes."

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

"I demand that you leave at once, sit!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right."

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

The giant chuckled.

"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.

"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind."

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt

sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley."

The giant chuckled darkly.

"Yet great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry."

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are."

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course."

"Er -- no," said Harry.

Hagrid looked shocked.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly.

"Sony?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It' s them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know about' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yet parents learned it all?"

"All what?" asked Harry.

"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.

"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff." But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world."

"What world?"

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

"DURSLEY!" he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble." Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

"But yeh must know about yet mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous."

"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"

"Yeh don' know... yeh don' know..." Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

"Yeh don' know what yeh are?" he said finally.

Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sit! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.

"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

"Ah, go boil yet heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yet a wizard."

There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

"-- a what?" gasped Harry.

"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter."

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.
Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet

another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're Well.

Hagrid

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.

"He's not going," he said.

Hagrid grunted.

"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.

"A what?" said Harry, interested.

"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like thern. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on."

"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"

"You knew?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"

"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How

could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that-that school-and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.

"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"

"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!" "But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.

"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone 3 s gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'."

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it..."

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows --"

"Who? "

"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does."

"Why not?"

"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went... bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was..."

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.

"Nah -can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches... terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.

"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before... probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em... maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an' --"

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway..."

"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't

do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a Powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived."

Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot..."

"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end --"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -I'm warning you -- one more word... "

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

"But what happened to Vol--, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"

"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see... he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?"

"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don~ reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.

"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right."

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it... every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry... chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach... dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back... and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his

revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.

"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and --"

"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter' s son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL To TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!"
yelled Uncle Vernon.

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER," he thundered, "- INSULT- ALBUS- DUMBLEDORE- IN- FRONT- OF- ME!"

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do."

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job

"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.

"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore." "Why were you expelled?"

"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that."

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' dormice in one o' the pockets."

CHAPTER FIVE

DIAGON ALLEY

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

"It was a dream, he told himself firmly. "I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I'll be at home in my cupboard."

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there's Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn't open his eyes. It had been such a good

dream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"All right," Harry mumbled, "I'm getting up."

He sat up and Hagrid's heavy coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him. He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the newspaper on top of Hagrid, who didn't wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid's coat.

"Don't do that."

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

"Hagrid!" said Harry loudly. "There's an owl

"Pay him," Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

"What?"

"He wants payin' fer deliverin' the paper. Look in the pockets." Hagrid's coat seemed to be made of nothing but pockets -- bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags... finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

"Give him five Knuts," said Hagrid sleepily.

"Knuts?"

"The little bronze ones."

Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. Then he flew off through the open window.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

"Best be Off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an' buy all yer stuff fer school."

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

"Um -- Hagrid?"

"Mm?" said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

"I haven't got any money -- and you heard Uncle Vernon last night ... he won't pay for me to go and learn magic."

"Don't worry about that," said Hagrid, standing up and scratching his head. "D'yeh think yer parents didn't leave yeh anything?"

"But if their house was destroyed --"

"They didn' keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards' bank. Have a sausage, they're not bad cold -- an' I wouldn' say no teh a bit o' yer birthday cake, neither."

"Wizards have banks?"

"Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins."

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

"Goblins?"

"Yeah -- so yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it, I'll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe -- 'cept maybe Hogwarts. As a matter o' fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway. Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business." Hagrid drew himself up proudly. "He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin' you gettin' things from Gringotts -- knows he can trust me, see.

"Got everythin'? Come on, then."

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight. The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

"How did you get here?" Harry asked, looking around for another boat. "Flew," said Hagrid.

"Flew?"

"Yeah -- but we'll go back in this. Not s'pposed ter use magic now I've got yeh."

They settled down in the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter -- er -- speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells -- enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the highsecurity vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way -- Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London, see. Deep under the Underground. Yeh'd die of hunger tryin' ter get out, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the Daily Prophet. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this, but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

"Ministry o' Magic messin' things up as usual," Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

"'Course," said Hagrid. "They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, o' "

course, but he'd never leave Hogwarts, so old Cornelius Fudge got the job. Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every morning, askin' fer advice."

"But what does a Ministry of Magic do?"

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

"Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone."

At this moment the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clambered up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn't blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, "See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?"

"Hagrid," said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, "did you say there are dragons at Gringotts?"

"Well, so they say," said Hagrid. "Crikey, I'd like a dragon."

"You'd like one?"

"Wanted one ever since I was a kid -- here we go."

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes' time. Hagrid, who didn't understand "Muggle money," as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

"Still got yer letter, Harry?" he asked as he counted stitches. Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

"Good," said Hagrid. "There's a list there of everything yeh need."

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn't noticed the night before, and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emetic Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

wand cauldron (pewter, standard size 2) set

glass or crystal phials

telescope set

brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

**PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED
THEIR OWN
BROOMSTICKS**

"Can we buy all this in London?" Harry wondered aloud.

"If yeh know where to go," said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the trains too slow.

"I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic," he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed book shops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it could sell you a magic wand. This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke that the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn't known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn't help trusting him.

"This is it," said Hagrid, coming to a halt, "the Leaky Cauldron. It's a famous place."

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn't pointed it out,

Harry wouldn't have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it. Before he could mention this, Hagrid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut. The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, "The usual, Hagrid?"

"Can't, Tom, I'm on Hogwarts business," said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry's shoulder and making Harry's knees buckle.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this -- can this be --?"

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter... what an honor."

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

Harry didn't know what to say. Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand -- I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can't tell you, Diggle's the name, Dedalus Diggle."

"I've seen you before!" said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle's top hat fell off in his excitement. "You bowed to me once in a shop."

"He remembers!" cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!" Harry shook hands again and again -- Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p- pleased I am to meet you."

"What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?"

"D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts," muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he'd rather not think about it. "N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?" He laughed nervously. "You'll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I've g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself." He looked terrified at the very thought.

But the others wouldn't let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

"Must get on -- lots ter buy. Come on, Harry."

Doris Crockford shook Harry's hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

"Told yeh, didn't I? Told yeh you was famous. Even Professor Quirrell

was tremblin' ter meet yeh -- mind you, he's usually tremblin'."

"Is he always that nervous?"

"Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was studyin' outta books but then he took a year off ter get some firsthand experience.... They say he met vampires in the Black Forest, and there was a nasty bit o' trouble with a hag -- never been the same since. Scared of the students, scared of his own subject now, where's me umbrella?"

Vampires? Hags? Harry's head was swimming. Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

"Three up... two across he muttered. "Right, stand back, Harry."

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered -- it wriggled -- in the middle, a small hole appeared -- it grew wider and wider -- a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," said Hagrid, "to Diagon Alley."

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. Cauldrons -- All Sizes - Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver -- Self-Stirring -- Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

"Yeah, you'll be needin' one," said Hagrid, "but we gotta get yer money first."

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad...."

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium -- Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand -- fastest ever --" There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon....

"Gringotts," said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was -

"Yeah, that's a goblin," said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

"Like I said, Yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it," said Hagrid.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a

vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

"Morning," said Hagrid to a free goblin. "We've come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter's safe."

"You have his key, Sir?"

"Got it here somewhere," said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblin's book of numbers. The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of rubies as big as glowing coals.

"Got it," said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

"That seems to be in order."

"An' I've also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore," said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. "It's about the YouKnow-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen."

The goblin read the letter carefully.

"Very well," he said, handing it back to Hagrid, "I will have Someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!"

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the doors leading off the hall.

"What's the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen?" Harry asked.

"Can't tell yeh that," said Hagrid mysteriously. "Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore's trusted me. More'n my job's worth ter tell yeh that."

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had expected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches. It sloped steeply downward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them. They climbed in -- Hagrid with some difficulty -- and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible. The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn't steering.

Harry's eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late - - they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

"I never know," Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, "what's the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?"

"Stalagmite's got an 'm' in it," said Hagrid. "An' don' ask me questions just now, I think I'm gonna be sick."

He did look very green, and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

"All yours," smiled Hagrid.

All Harry's -- it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn't have known about this or they'd have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

"The gold ones are Galleons," he explained. "Seventeen silver Sickles to

a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it's easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o' terms, we'll keep the rest safe for yeh." He turned to Griphook. "Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?"

"One speed only," said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed. The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners. They went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Hagrid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

"Stand back," said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers and it simply melted away.

"If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there," said Griphook.

"How often do you check to see if anyone's inside?" Harry asked.

"About once every ten years," said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least -- but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

"Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don't talk to me on the way back, it's best if I keep me mouth shut," said Hagrid.

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life -- more money than even Dudley had ever had.

"Might as well get yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I

slipped off for a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts." He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

"Hogwarts, clear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here -- another young man being fitted up just now, in fact. "

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him) slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

"I do -- Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"No," said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been -- imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" "Mmm," said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

"I say, look at that man!" said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing at two large ice creams to show he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn't. "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of savage -- lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly.

"Do you?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other, not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawling boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had bought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

"What's up?" said Hagrid.

"Nothing," Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, "Hagrid, what's Quidditch?"

"Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin' how little yeh know -- not knowin' about Quidditch!"

"Don't make me feel worse," said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pate boy in Madam Malkin's.

"--and he said people from Muggle families shouldn't even be allowed in."

"Yer not from a Muggle family. If he'd known who yeh were -- he's grown up knowin' yer name if his parents are wizardin' folk. You saw what everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o' the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in 'em in a long line o' Muggles -- look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!"

"So what is Quidditch?"

"It's our sport. Wizard sport. It's like -- like soccer in the Muggle world -- everyone follows Quidditch -- played up in the air on broomsticks and there's four balls -- sorta hard ter explain the rules."
"And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?"

"School houses. There's four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o' duffers, but --"

"I bet I'm in Hufflepuff" said Harry gloomily.

"Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin," said Hagrid darkly. "There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one."

"Vol-, sorry - You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?"

"Years an' years ago," said Hagrid.

They bought Harry's school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from Curses and Countercurses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

"I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley."

"I'm not sayin' that's not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances," said Hagrid. "An' anyway, yeh couldn' work any of them curses yet, yeh'll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level."

Hagrid wouldn't let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either ("It says pewter on yer list"), but they got a nice set of scales for weighing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell, a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic potion ingredients for Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and minuscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry's list again.

"Just yer wand left - A yeah, an' I still haven't got yeh a birthday present."

Harry felt himself go red.

"You don't have to --"

"I know I don't have to. Tell yeh what, I'll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh'd be laughed at - an' I don' like cats, they make me sneeze. I'll get yer an owl. All the kids want

owls, they're dead useful, carry yer mail an' everythin'."

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn't stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

"Don' mention it," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don' expect you've had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now - only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand."

A magic wand... this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello," said Harry awkwardly.

"Ah yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." It wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work."

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those

silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it -- it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

"And that's where..."

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry's forehead with a long, white finger.

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it," he said softly.

"Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands... well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do...."

He shook his head and then, to Harry's relief, spotted Hagrid.

"Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again.... Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir, yes," said Hagrid.

"Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?" said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

"Er -- yes, they did, yes," said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. "I've still got the pieces, though," he added brightly.

"But you don't use them?" said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

"Oh, no, sit," said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

"Hmmm," said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. "Well, now -- Mr. Potter. Let me see." He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

"Er -- well, I'm right-handed," said Harry.

"Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try --"

Harry tried -- but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no -here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere -- I wonder, now - - yes, why not -- unusual combination -- holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Hagrid whooped and

clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well... how curious... how very curious... "

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious... curious..

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather -- just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember.... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter.... After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things -- terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap. Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Hagrid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bite to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

"You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet," said Hagrid.

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life -- and yet -- he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander... but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened when Vol-, sorry -- I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. just be yerself. I know it's hard. Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts -- I did -- still do, 'smatter of fact."

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts, " he said. "First o' September -- King's Cross -- it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me.... See yeh soon, Harry."

The train pulled out of the station. Harry wanted to watch Hagrid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

CHAPTER SIX

THE JOURNEY FROM PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-QUARTERS

Harry's last month with the Dursleys wasn't fun. True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn't stay in the same room, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him -- in fact, they didn't speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did become a bit depressing after a while.

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company. He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in *A History of Magic*. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased. It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn't come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice. Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, counting down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day, so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

"Er -- Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"Er -- I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to -- to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

"Thank you."

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

Harry didn't say anything.

"Where is this school, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

"I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o'clock," he read.

His aunt and uncle stared.

"Platform what?"

"Nine and three-quarters."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Uncle Vernon. "There is no platform nine and three-quarters."

"It's on my ticket."

"Barking," said Uncle Vernon, "howling mad, the lot of them. You'll see. You just wait. All right, we'll take you to King's Cross. We're going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn't bother."

"Why are you going to London?" Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

"Taking Dudley to the hospital," growled Uncle Vernon. "Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings."

Harry woke at five o'clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep. He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn't want to walk into the station in his wizard's robes -- he'd change on the train. He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up. Two hours later, Harry's huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys' car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry, and they had set off.

They reached King's Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry's trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

"Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine -- platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they?"

He was quite right, of course. There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and

in the middle, nothing at all.

"Have a good term," said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing. Harry's mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do? He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He'd have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard, but didn't dare mention platform nine and three-quarters. The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn't even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stupid on purpose. Getting desperate, Harry asked for the train that left at eleven o'clock, but the guard said there wasn't one. In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic. According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hogwarts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the middle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platforms nine and ten.

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"-- packed with Muggles, of course --"

Harry swung round. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair. Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him -- and they had an owl.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were saying.

"Now, what's the platform number?" said the boys' mother.

"Nine and three-quarters!" piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, "Mom, can't I go... "

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet. All right, Percy, you go

first."

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it -- but just as the boy reached the dividing barrier between the two platforms, a large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

"Fred, you next," the plump woman said.

"I'm not Fred, I'm George," said the boy. "Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? Can you tell I'm George?"

"Sorry, George, dear."

"Only joking, I am Fred," said the boy, and off he went. His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, because a second later, he had gone -- but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier he was almost there -- and then, quite suddenly, he wasn't anywhere.

There was nothing else for it.

"Excuse me," Harry said to the plump woman.

"Hello, dear," she said. "First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too."

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

"Yes," said Harry. "The thing is -- the thing is, I don't know how to --"

"How to get onto the platform?" she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

"Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron."

"Er -- okay," said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble -- leaning forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run -- the barrier was coming nearer and nearer -- he wouldn't be able to stop -- the cart was out of control -- he was a foot away -- he closed his eyes ready for the crash --

It didn't come... he kept on running... he opened his eyes. A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven O'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it. He had done it.

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

"Want a hand?" It was one of the red-haired twins he'd followed through

the barrier.

"Yes, please," Harry panted.

"Oy, Fred! C'mere and help!"

With the twins' help, Harry's trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

"Thanks," said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

"What's that?" said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry's lightning scar.

"Blimey," said the other twin. "Are you

"He is," said the first twin. "Aren't you?" he added to Harry.

"What?" said Harry.

"Harry Potter," chorused the twins.

"Oh, him," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I am."

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then, to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train's open door.

"Fred? George? Are you there?"

"Coming, Mom."

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying. Their mother had just taken out her handkerchief.

"Ron, you've got something on your nose."

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

"Mom -- geroff" He wriggled free.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?" said one of the twins.

"Shut up," said Ron.

"Where's Percy?" said their mother.

"He's coming now."

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny silver badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

"Can't stay long, Mother," he said. "I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves --"

"Oh, are you a prefect, Percy?" said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. "You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it," said the other twin. "Once --"

"Or twice --"

"A minute --"

"All summer --"

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" said one of the twins.

"Because he's a prefect," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term -- send me an owl when you get there."

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

"Now, you two -- this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've -- you've blown up a toilet or --"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mom."

"It's not funny. And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us."

"Shut up," said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins already and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

"Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we just met on the train?"

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn't see him looking.

"You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?"

"Who?"

"Harry Potter!"

Harry heard the little girl's voice.

"Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, eh please...."

"You've already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn't something you goggle at in a zoo. Is he really, Fred? How do you know?"

"Asked him. Saw his scar. It's really there - like lightning."

"Poor dear - no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform."

"Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?"

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

"I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No, don't you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day at school."

"All right, keep your hair on."

A whistle sounded.

"Hurry up!" their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."

"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."

"George!"

"Only joking, Mom."

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys' mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn't know what he was going to but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

The door of the compartment slid open and the youngest redheaded boy came in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry.
"Everywhere else is full."

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn't looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

"Hey, Ron."

The twins were back.

"Listen, we're going down the middle of the train -- Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula down there."

"Right," mumbled Ron.

"Harry," said the other twin, "did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley. And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then."

"Bye," said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" Ron blurted out.

Harry nodded.

"Oh -well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes," said Ron. "And have you really got -- you know..."

He pointed at Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

"So that's where You-Know-Who

"Yes," said Harry, "but I can't remember it."

"Nothing?" said Ron eagerly.

"Well -- I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else."

"Wow," said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

"Er -- Yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mom's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him."

"So you must know loads of magic already."

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

"I heard you went to live with Muggles," said Ron. "What are they like?"

"Horrible -well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I'd had three wizard brothers."

"Five," said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left -- Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat gray rat, which was asleep.

"His name's Scabbers and he's useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect, but they couldn't aff -- I mean, I got Scabbers instead."

Ron's ears went pink. He seemed to think he'd said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Harry didn't think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he'd never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley's old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

"... and until Hagrid told me, I didn't know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort"

Ron gasped.

"What?" said Harry.

"You said You-Know-Who's name!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people --"

"I'm not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name," said Harry, "I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean? I've got loads to learn.... I bet," he added, voicing for the first time something that had been worrying him a lot lately, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough."

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

Harry, who hadn't had any breakfast, leapt to his feet, but Ron's ears went pink again and he muttered that he'd brought sandwiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry -- but the woman didn't have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not wanting to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

"Hungry, are you?"

"Starving," said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, "She always forgets I don't like corned beef."

"Swap you for one of these," said Harry, holding up a pasty. "Go on --"

"You don't want this, it's all dry," said Ron. "She hasn't got much time," he added quickly, "you know, with five of us."

"Go on, have a pasty," said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay forgotten).

"What are these?" Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. "They're not really frogs, are they?" He was starting to feel that nothing would surprise him.

"No," said Ron. "But see what the card is. I'm missing Agrippa."

"What?"

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know -- Chocolate Frogs have cards, inside them, you know, to collect -- famous witches and wizards. I've got about five hundred, but I haven't got Agrippa or Ptolemy."

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man's face. He wore half-moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache. Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

"So this is Dumbledore!" said Harry.

"Don't tell me you'd never heard of Dumbledore!" said Ron. "Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa -- thanks"

Harry turned over his card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

Harry turned the card back over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore's face had disappeared.

"He's gone!"

"Well, you can't expect him to hang around all day," said Ron. "He'll be back. No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her... do you want it? You can start collecting."

Ron's eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

"Help yourself," said Harry. "But in, you know, the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos."

"Do they? What, they don't move at all?" Ron sounded amazed. "weird!"

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they mean every flavor -- you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and mar-malade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh -- see? Sprouts."

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and threequarters came in. He looked tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When they shook their heads, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting

away from me!"

"He'll turn up," said Harry.

"Yes," said the boy miserably. "Well, if you see him..."

He left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," said Ron. "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

The rat was still snoozing on Ron's lap.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work. I'll show you, look..."

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

"Unicorn hair's nearly poking out. Anyway

He had just raised his 'wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him. She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

"We've already told him we haven't seen it," said Ron, but the girl wasn't listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

"Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it, then."

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

"Er -- all right."

He cleared his throat.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow."

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" said the girl. "Well, it's not very good, is it? I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard -- I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough -- I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you.

She said all this very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all the course books by heart either.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course -- I got a few extra books. for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.

"Am I?" said Harry, feeling dazed.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," said Hermione. "Do either of you know what house you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad.... Anyway, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

"Whatever house I'm in, I hope she's not in it," said Ron. He threw his wand back into his trunk. "Stupid spell -- George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

"What house are your brothers in?" asked Harry.

"Gryffindor," said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. "Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

"That's the house Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who was in?"

"Yeah," said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking depressed.

"You know, I think the ends of Scabbers' whiskers are a bit lighter," said Harry, trying to take Ron's mind off houses. "So what do your oldest brothers do now that they've left, anyway?"

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he'd finished school.

"Charlie's in Romania studying dragons, and Bill's in Africa doing something for Gringotts," said Ron. "Did you hear about

Gringotts? It's been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don't suppose you get that with the Muggles -- someone tried to rob a high security vault."

Harry stared.

"Really? What happened to them?"

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You-Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying "Voldemort" without worrying.

"What's your Quidditch team?" Ron asked.

"Er -- I don't know any," Harry confessed.

"What!" Ron looked dumbfounded. "Oh, you wait, it's the best game in the

world --" And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he'd been to with his brothers and the broomstick he'd like to get if he had the money. He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigget. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Draco Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riffraff like the

Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"Say that again," Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now," said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

"But we don't feel like leaving, do we, boys? We've eaten all our food and you still seem to have some."

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron - Ron leapt forward, but before he'd so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle's knuckle - Crabbe and Malfoy backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scabbers finally flew off and hit the window, all three of them disappeared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they'd heard footsteps, because a second later, Hermione Granger had come in.

"What has been going on?" she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

"I think he's been knocked out," Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. "No -- I don't believe it -- he's gone back to sleep--"

And so he had.

"You've met Malfoy before?"

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

"I've heard of his family," said Ron darkly. "They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side." He turned to Hermione. "Can we help you with something?"

"You'd better hurry up and put your robes on, I've just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we're nearly there. You haven't been fighting, have you? You'll be in trouble before we even get there!"

"Scabbers has been fighting, not us," said Ron, scowling at her. "Would you mind leaving while we change?"

"All right -- I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childishly, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice. "And you've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron's were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers underneath them.

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me -- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

"Ye' all get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Ooooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione. "Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then -- FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

"Oy, you there! Is this your toad?" said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

"Trevor!" cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, Oak front door.

"Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?"

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SORTING HAT

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right -- the rest of the school must already be here -- but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "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 rulebreaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. 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."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

"How exactly do they sort us into houses?" he asked Ron.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet -- what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need. Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He'd never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teacher's wig blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air -- several people behind him screamed.

"What the --?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance --"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost -- I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard

Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*."

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn't have let it in the house.

Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it, Harry thought wildly, that seemed the sort of thing -- noticing that everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, he stared at it, too. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth -- and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffis are true And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
if you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Harry. smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather alot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moments pause

--

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

"Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor, and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling.

"Bulstrode, Millicent" then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry's imagination, after all he'd heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot. He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen, not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus," the sandy-haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he'd better get back on the train?

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool. The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted, "GRYFFINDOR," Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to "MacDougal, Morag."

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!"

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

There weren't many people left now. "Moon" "Nott" "Parkinson" then a pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil" then "Perks, Sally-Anne" and then, at last -- "Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

The Harry Potter?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he

was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, A my goodness, yes -- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting.... So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that -- no? Well, if you're sure -- better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!" Harry sat down opposite the ghost in the ruff he'd seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he'd just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry recognized him at once from the card he'd gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train. Dumbledore's silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts. Harry spotted Professor Quirrell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

And now there were only three people left to be sorted. "Thomas, Dean," a Black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Turpin, Lisa," became a Ravenclaw and then it was Ron's turn. He was pale green by now. Harry crossed his fingers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," said Percy Weasley Pompously across Harry as "Zabini, Blaise," was made a Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he -- a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry, but he'd never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if it made him sick. Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat. It was all delicious.

"That does look good," said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak,

"Can't you --?"

I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"I know who you are!" said Ron suddenly. "My brothers told me about you -- you're Nearly Headless Nick!"

"I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy --" the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

"Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?"

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn't going at all the way he wanted.

"Like this," he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, "So -- new Gryffindors! I hope you're going to help us win the house championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable -- he's the Slytherin ghost."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn't look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

"How did he get covered in blood?" asked Seamus with great interest.

"I've never asked," said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate eclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding -- "

As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

"I'm half-and-half," said Seamus. "Me dad's a Muggle. Mom didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

The others laughed.

"What about you, Neville?" said Ron.

"Well, my gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was all- Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me -- he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned -- but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced -- all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here -- they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad."

On Harry's other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talking about lessons ("I do hope they start right away, there's so much to learn, I'm particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it's supposed to be very difficult-"; "You'll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing -- ").

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at

the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes -- and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Percy.

"N-nothing."

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teacher's look -- a feeling that he didn't like Harry at all.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he's looking so nervous, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn't want to -- everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn't look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Ahern -- just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

"He's not serious?" he muttered to Percy.

"Must be," said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. "It's odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere -- the forest's full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!" And the school bellowed:

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we've forgot,

just do your best, we'll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march. Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they

had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry's legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food. He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden behind sliding panels and hanging tapestries. They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

"Peeves," Percy whispered to the first years. "A poltergeist." He raised his voice, "Peeves -- show yourself"

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

"Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?"

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Oooooooh!" he said, with an evil cackle. "Ickle Firsties! What fun!"

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!" barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville's head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

"You want to watch out for Peeves," said Percy, as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects. Here we are."

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said. "Caput Draconis," said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it -- Neville needed a leg up -- and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. At the top of a spiral staircase -- they were obviously in one of the towers -- they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red, velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their pajamas and fell into bed.

"Great food, isn't it?" Ron muttered to Harry through the hangings. "Get off, Scabbers! He's chewing my sheets."

Harry was going to ask Ron if he'd had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much, because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept talking to him, telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny. Harry told the turban he didn't want to be in Slytherin; it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully -- and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it -then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold -- there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke next day, he didn't remember the dream at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POTIONS MASTER

There, look."

"Where?"

"Next to the tall kid with the red hair."

"Wearing the glasses?"

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his scar?"

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn't, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

The ghosts didn't help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open. Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction, but Peeves the Poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet, pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose, and screech, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch. Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning. Filch found them trying to force their way through a door that unluckily turned out to be the entrance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor. He wouldn't believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose, and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris, a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamp like eyes just like Filch's. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she'd whisk off for Filch, who'd appear, wheezing, two seconds later. Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins) and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout, where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old

indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emetic the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of their first class he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Professor McGonagall was again different. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they

weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and gave Hermione a rare smile.

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke. His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban, and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn't had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn't have much of a head start.

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

"What have we got today?" Harry asked Ron as he poured sugar on his porridge.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins," said Ron. "Snape's Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them -- we'll be able to see if it's true."

"Wish McGonagall favored us, " said Harry. Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn't stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast,

circling the tables until they saw their owners, and dropping letters and packages onto their laps.

Hedwig hadn't brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls. This morning, however, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry's plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three?

I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry borrowed Ron's quill, scribbled Yes, please, see you later on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry -- he hated him.

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, Yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new -- celebrity."

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered behind their

hands. Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had y caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses.... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.

"I don't know, sit," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

"Tut, tut -- fame clearly isn't everything."

He ignored Hermione's hand.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn't have the faintest idea what a bezoar was. He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

"I don't know, sit." "Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming,

eh, Potter?" Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes. He had looked through his books at the Dursleys', but did Snape expect him to remember everything in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*?

Snape was still ignoring Hermione's quivering hand.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus's eye, and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

"Sit down," he snapped at Hermione. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter."

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

"You -- Potter -- why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

"Don't push it," he muttered, "I've heard Snape can turn very nasty."

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry's mind was racing and his spirits were low. He'd lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week -- why did Snape hate him so much? "Cheer up," said Ron, "Snape's always taking points off Fred and George. Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?"

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "Back, Fang -- back."

Hagrid's big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

"Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner

stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

"Another Weasley, eh?" said Hagrid, glancing at Ron's freckles. I spent half me life chasin' yer twin brothers away from the forest."

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they told Hagrid all about their first -lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes.

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Fitch "that old git."

"An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I'd like ter introduce her to Fang sometime. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her -- Fitch puts her up to it."

Harry told Hagrid about Snape's lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the students.

"But he seemed to really hate me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why should he?"

Yet Harry couldn't help thinking that Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

"How's yer brother Charlie?" Hagrid asked Ron. "I liked him a lot -- great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose. While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake. Harry read the story again. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package. Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse, Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid. Had Hagrid collected that package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

CHAPTER NINE

THE MIDNIGHT DUEL

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much. Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday -- and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Malfoy certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the house Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charlie's old broom. Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book -- not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Neville was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He

opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Remembrall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things -- this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red -- oh..." His face fell, because the Remembrall had suddenly glowed scarlet,

"You've forgotten something..."

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Remembrall out of his hand.

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfoy, but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Remembrall back on the table.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a

broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"UPF everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle -- three -- two --"

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle -- twelve feet -- twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and --

WHAM -- a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter. "Come on, boy -- it's all right,

up you get."

She turned to the rest of the class.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?"

The other Slytherins joined in.

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Parvati Patil.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. "Never thought you'd like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

"Look!" said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

"Give that here, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find -- how about -- up a tree?"

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn't been lying, he could fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. "Madam Hooch told us not to move -- you'll get us all into trouble."

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out behind him -and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught -- this was easy, this was wonderful. He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in midair. Malfoy looked stunned.

"Give it here," Harry called, "or I'll knock you off that broom!" "Oh, yeah?" said Malfoy, trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leaned forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Malfoy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy," Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down -- next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball -- wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching -- he stretched out his hand -- a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running toward them. He got to his feet, trembling.

"Never -- in all my time at Hogwarts --"

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, "-- how dare you -- might have broken your neck --"

"It wasn't his fault, Professor --"

"Be quiet, Miss Patil

"But Malfoy --"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it. He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside, and still Professor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others becoming wizards, while he stumped around the grounds carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwicles class looking confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked. Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood -- I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light -- speedy -- we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor -- a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks...."

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was an excellent Quidditch player himself."

"You're joking."

It was dinnertime. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall. Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

"Seeker?" he said. "But first years never -- you must be the youngest house player in about a century, said Harry, shoveling pie into his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Ron was so amazed, so impressed, he just sat and gaped at Harry.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too -- Beaters."

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch cup for sure this year," said Fred. "We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

"Anyway, we've got to go, Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passageway out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

Fred and George had hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

"You're a lot braver now that you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only -- no contact. What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Of course he has," said Ron, wheeling around. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other. "What is a wizard's duel?" said Harry. "And what do you mean, you're my second?"

"Well, a second's there to take over if you die," said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry's face, he added quickly, "But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy'll be able to do is send sparks at each other. Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway."

"And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?"

"Throw it away and punch him on the nose," Ron suggested. "Excuse me."

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

"Can't a person eat in peace in this place?" said Ron.

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying --"

"Bet you could," Ron muttered.

"--and you mustn't go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you'll lose Gryffindor if you're caught, and you're bound to be. It's really very selfish of you."

"And it's really none of your business," said Harry.

"Good-bye," said Ron.

All the same, it wasn't what you'd call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling asleep (Neville wasn't back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as "If he tries to curse you, you'd better dodge it, because I can't remember how to block them." There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today. On the other hand, Malfoys sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness - this was his big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face. He couldn't miss it.

"Half-past eleven," Ron muttered at last, "we'd better go."

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase, and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them, "I can't believe you're going to do this, Harry."

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

"You!" said Ron furiously. "Go back to bed!"

"I almost told your brother," Hermione snapped, "Percy -- he's a prefect, he'd put a stop to this."

Harry couldn't believe anyone could be so interfering.

"Come on," he said to Ron. He pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn't going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

"Don't you care about Gryffindor, do you only care about yourselves, I don't want Slytherin to win the house cup, and you'll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells."

"Go away." "All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you're on the train home tomorrow, you're so --"

But what they were, they didn't find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor tower.

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked shrilly.

"That's your problem," said Ron. "We've got to go, we're going to be late."

They hadn't even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You are not."

"D'you think I'm going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I'll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you, and you can back me up."

"You've got some nerve --" said Ron loudly.

"Shut up, both of you!" said Harry sharply. I heard something."

It was a sort of snuffling.

"Mrs. Norris?" breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

It wasn't Mrs. Norris. It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but jerked suddenly awake as they crept nearer.

"Thank goodness you found me! I've been out here for hours, I couldn't remember the new password to get in to bed."

"Keep your voice down, Neville. The password's 'Pig snout' but it won't help you now, the Fat Lady's gone off somewhere."

"How's your arm?" said Harry.

"Fine," said Neville, showing them. "Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute."

"Good - well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later --"

"Don't leave me!" said Neville, scrambling to his feet, "I don't want to stay here alone, the Bloody Baron's been past twice already."

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

"If either of you get us caught, I'll never rest until I've learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you.

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies, but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

They flitted along corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were lucky. They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed toward the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren't there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness. They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

"He's late, maybe he's chickened out," Ron whispered.

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak -and it wasn't Malfoy.

"Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner."

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently toward the door, away from Filch's voice. Neville's robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

"They're in here somewhere," they heard him mutter, "probably hiding."

"This way!" Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor. They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a frightened squeak and broke into a run -he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist, and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following -- they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Harry in the lead, without any idea where they were or where they were going -- they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

"I think we've lost him," Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead. Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

I -- told -you," Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest, "I -- told -- you."

"We've got to get back to Gryffindor tower," said Ron, "quickly as possible."

"Malfoy tricked you," Hermione said to Harry. "You realize that, don't you? He was never going to meet you -- Filch knew someone was going to

be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off."

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Let's go."

It wasn't going to be that simple. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

"Shut up, Peeves -- please -- you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled.

"Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves this was a big mistake.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor where they slammed into a door -- and it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door, "We're done for! This is the end!" They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeves's shouts.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, 'Alohomora!'"

The lock clicked and the door swung open -- they piled through it, shut

it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying. "Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please.'"

"Don't mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his annoying singsong voice.

"All right -please."

"NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!" And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

"He thinks this door is locked," Harry whispered. "I think we'll be okay -- get off, Neville!" For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry's bathrobe for the last minute. "What?"

Harry turned around -- and saw, quite clearly, what. For a moment, he was sure he'd walked into a nightmare -- this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching

and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry groped for the doorknob -- between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

They fell backward -- Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew, back down the corridor. Filch must have hurried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared -- all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

"Never mind that -- pig snout, pig snout," panted Harry, and the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" said Ron finally. "If any dog needs exercise, that one does."

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again. "You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?" she snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on."

"The floor?" Harry suggested. "I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads."

"No, not the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something."

She stood up, glaring at them.

I hope you're pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed -- or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

"No, we don't mind," he said. "You'd think we dragged her along, wouldn't you."

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed

back into bed. The dog was guarding something.... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide -- except perhaps Hogwarts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby little package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

CHAPTER TEN

HALLOWEEN

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one. In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection. "It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron. "Or both," said Harry.

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus. All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later.

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor. They had hardly fluttered out of the way when another owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven o'clock for your first training session.

Professor McGonagall

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even touched one."

They left the hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. "You'll be in for it this time, Potter, first years aren't allowed them."

Ron couldn't resist it.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "it's a Nimbus Two Thousand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?" Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy, but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," said Malfoy quickly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sit," said Harry, fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy's face. "And it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," he added.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy's obvious rage and confusion. "Well, it's true," Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, "If he hadn't stolen Neville's Remembrall I wouldn't be on the team...."

"So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" came an angry voice from just behind them. Hermione was stomping up the stairs, looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry's hand.

"I thought you weren't speaking to us?" said Harry.

"Yes, don't stop now," said Ron, "it's doing us so much good."

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broomstick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he'd be learning to play that night. He bolted his dinner that evening without noticing what he was eating, and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

"Wow," Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry's bedspread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

As seven o'clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. He'd never been inside the stadium before. Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the field so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end

of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle

children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling -- he swooped in and out of the goal posts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his lightest touch.

"Hey, Potter, come down!"

Oliver Wood had arrived. He was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm. Harry landed next to him.

"Very nice," said Wood, his eyes glinting. "I see what McGonagall meant... you really are a natural. I'm just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you'll be joining team practice three times a week."

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

"Right," said Wood. "Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it's not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers."

"Three Chasers," Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

"This ball's called the Quaffle," said Wood. "The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?"

"The Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score," Harry recited. "So -- that's sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn't it?"

"What's basketball?" said Wood curiously. "Never mind," said Harry quickly.

"Now, there's another player on each side who's called the Keeper -I'm Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring."

"Three Chasers, one Keeper," said Harry, who was determined to remember it all. "And they play with the Quaffle. Okay, got that. So what are they for?" He pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

"I'll show you now," said Wood. "Take this."

He handed Harry a small club, a bit like a short baseball bat.

"I'm going to show you what the Bludgers do," Wood said. "These two are the Bludgers."

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

"Stand back," Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry's face. Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose, and sent it zigzagging away into the air -- it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

"See?" Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely. "The Bludgers rocket around, trying to knock players off their brooms. That's why you have two Beaters on each team -- the Weasley twins are ours -- it's their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So -- think you've got all that?"

"Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team," Harry reeled off.

"Very good," said Wood.

"Er -- have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?" Harry asked, hoping he sounded offhand.

"Never at Hogwarts. We've had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the

Seeker. That's you. And you don't have to worry about the Quaffle or the Bludgers unless they crack my head open."

"Don't worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers -- I mean, they're like a pair of human Bludgers themselves."

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

"This," said Wood, "is the Golden Snitch, and it's the most important ball of the lot. It's very hard to catch because it's so fast and difficult to see. It's the Seeker's job to catch it. You've got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle to get it before the other team's Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they

nearly always win. That's why Seekers get fouled so much. A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages -- I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep. "Well, that's it -- any questions?"

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

"We won't practice with the Snitch yet," said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, "it's too dark, we might lose it. Let's try you out with a few of these."

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the golf balls as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Harry didn't miss a single one, and Wood was delighted. After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn't carry on.

"That Quidditch cup'll have our name on it this year," said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. "I wouldn't be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn't gone off chasing dragons."

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had. His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom. Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye). Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

It was very difficult. Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skyward just lay on the desktop. Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it -- Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of the class. "It's no wonder no one can stand her," he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor, "she's a nightmare, honestly. "

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face -- and was startled to see that she was in tears.

"I think she heard you."

"So?" said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll -- in the dungeons -- thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

"Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm.

"I've just thought -- Hermione."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?"

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it -- a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed -- at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

"The keys in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea," said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door, and lock it.

"Yes!"

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop -- a high, petrified scream -- and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up.

"Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

"Hermione!" they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

"Confuse it!" Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

"Oy, pea-brain!" yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn't even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

"Come on, run, run!" Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped -- it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him

off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand -- not knowing what he was going to do he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over -- and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it -- dead?"

"I don't think so," said Harry, "I think it's just been knocked out."

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy gray glue.

"Urgh -- troll boogers."

He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in

your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

"Please, Professor McGonagall -- they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

I went looking for the troll because I -- I thought I could deal with it on my own -- you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher? "If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Harry and Ron tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well -- in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Hermione left.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first years could have

taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled.

"Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron admitted. "Mind you, we did save her."

"She might not have needed saving if we hadn't locked the thing in with her," Harry reminded him.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig snout," they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them. There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUIDDITCH

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in

his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the house championship.

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn't know which was worse -- people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him holding a mattress.

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermlone as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also lent him *Quidditch Through the Ages*, which turned out to be a very interesting read.

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll, and she was much nicer for it. The day before Harry's first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar. They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm, when Snape crossed the yard. Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping. Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn't be allowed. Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye. He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but he seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," said Snape.
"Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

"He's just made that rule up," Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away. "Wonder what's wrong with his leg?"

"Dunno, but I hope it's really hurting him," said Ron bitterly.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat together next to a window. Hermione was checking Harry and Ron's Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

Harry felt restless. He wanted Quidditch Through the Ages back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow. Why should he be afraid of Snape? Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was going to ask Snape if he could have it.

"Better you than me," they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn't refuse if there were other teachers listening.

He made his way down to the staffroom and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try. He pushed the door ajar and peered inside -- and a horrible scene met his eyes.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone. Snape was holding his robes above his knees. One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

"Blasted thing," Snape was saying. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but --

"POTTER!"

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"GET OUT! OUT!"

Harry left, before Snape could take any more points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?"

In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when we saw him -- he's after whatever it's guarding! And I bet my broomstick he let that troll in, to make a diversion!"

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No -- he wouldn't, she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something," snapped Ron. "I'm with Harry. I wouldn't put anything past Snape. But what's he after? What's that dog guarding?"

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same question. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn't sleep. He tried to empty his mind -- he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours -- but the expression on Snape's face when Harry had seen his leg wasn't easy to forget.

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

"You've got to eat some breakfast."

"I don't want anything."

"Just a bit of toast," wheedled Hermione.

"I'm not hungry."

Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined. It said Potter for President, and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

"Okay, men," he said.

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

"And women," Wood agreed. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George.

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred told Harry, "we were on the team last year."

"Shut up, you two," said Wood. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years. We're going to win. I know it."

He glared at them all as if to say, "Or else."

"Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you."

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his

knees weren't going to give way, walked onto the field to loud cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

"Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, a sixth year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off. "And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor -- what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too --"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve -- back to Johnson and -- no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes -- Flint flying like an eagle up there -- he's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle -- that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and -- OUCH -- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger -- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins -- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger -- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which -- nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes -- she's really flying -- dodges a speeding Bludger -- the goal posts are ahead

-- come on, now, Angelina -- Keeper Bletchley dives -- misses --
GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid enough space to join them.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

"Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let off his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold, but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasleys' wristwatches, and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously toward Marcus Flint.

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell, and speeds toward the -- wait a moment -- was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too

busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch -all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs -- he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead - - he put on an extra spurt of speed --

WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below -- Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry's broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, "Send him off, ref! Red card!"

"What are you talking about, Dean?" said Ron.

"Red card!" said Dean furiously. "In soccer you get shown the red card and you're out of the game!"

"But this isn't soccer, Dean," Ron reminded him.

Hagrid, however, was on Dean's side.

"They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air."

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

"So -- after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating

"Jordan!" growled Professor McGonagall.

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul

'Jordan, I'm warning you --"

"All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinner, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He'd never felt anything like that.

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off. Harry tried to turn back toward the Gryffindor goal- posts -- he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out -- and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

Lee was still commentating.

"Slytherin in possession -- Flint with the Quaffle -- passes Spinnet -- passes Bell -- hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose -- only joking, Professor -- Slytherins score -- A no...

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely. It was carrying- him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

"Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing," Hagrid mumbled. He stared through his binoculars. "If I didn' know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom... but he can't have...."

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on. Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry's broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

"Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?" Seamus whispered.

"Can't have," Hagrid said, his voice shaking. "Can't nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic -- no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid's binoculars, but instead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

"What are you doing?" moaned Ron, gray-faced.

"I knew it," Hermione gasped, "Snape -- look."

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was muttering nonstop under his breath.

"He's doing something -- jinxing the broom," said Hermione.

"What should we do?"

"Leave it to me."

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good -- every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell.

Marcus

Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well-chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape's robes.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row -- Snape would never know what had happened.

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom.

"Neville, you can look!" Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid's jacket for the last five minutes.

Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick -- he hit the field on all fours -- coughed -- and something gold fell into his hand.

"I've got the Snitch!" he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

"He didn't catch it, he nearly swallowed it," Flint was still howling twenty minutes later, but it made no difference -- Harry hadn't broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the results -- Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty. Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a cup of strong tea back in Hagrid's hut, with Ron and Hermione.

"It was Snape," Ron was explaining, "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. "Why would Snape do somethin' like that?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

"I found out something about him," he told Hagrid. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" he said.

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah -- he's mine -- bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year -- I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the

"Yes?" said Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothin' of the sort."

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" cried Hermione.

The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them!

You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh -- yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel --"

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MIRROR OF ERISED

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find

itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worst of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them. Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he'd realized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick. So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet Drive for Christmas. Professor McGonagall had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, and Harry had signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying, too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" came Malfoys cold drawl from behind them. "Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose -- that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

"WEASLEY!"

Ron let go of the front of Malfoy's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily. "Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scattering needles everywhere and smirking.

"I'll get him," said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy's back, "one of these days, I'll get him --"

"I hate them both," said Harry, "Malfoy and Snape."

"Come on, cheer up, it's nearly Christmas," said Hagrid. "Tell yeh what, come with me an' see the Great Hall, looks a treat."

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to -the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

"Ah, Hagrid, the last tree -- put it in the far corner, would you?"

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

"How many days you got left until yer holidays?" Hagrid asked.

"Just one," said Hermione. "And that reminds me -Harry, Ron, we've got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library."

"Oh yeah, you're right," said Ron, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

"The library?" said Hagrid, following them out of the hall. "Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren't yeh?"

"Oh, we're not working," Harry told him brightly. "Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we've been trying to find out who he is."

"You what?" Hagrid looked shocked. "Listen here -- I've told yeh -- drop it. It's nothin' to you what that dog's guardin'."

"We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that's all," said Hermione.

"Unless you'd like to tell us and save us the trouble?" Harry added. "We must've been through hundreds of books already and we can't find him anywhere -- just give us a hint -- I know I've read his name somewhere."

"I'm sayin' nothin, said Hagrid flatly.

"Just have to find out for ourselves, then," said Ron, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel's name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal? The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century*, or *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*; he was missing, too, from *Important Modern Magical Discoveries*, and *A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry*. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random. Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section. He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in

there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he'd never get one. These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you looking for, boy?"

"Nothing," said Harry.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

"You'd better get out, then. Go on -- out!"

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story, Harry left the library. He, Ron, and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been looking for two weeks, after A, but as they only had odd moments between lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing. What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breathing down their necks.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

"You will keep looking while I'm away, won't you?" said Hermione. "And send me an owl if you find anything."

"And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is," said Ron. "It'd be safe to ask them."

"Very safe, as they're both dentists," said Hermione.

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork -- bread, English muffins, marshmallows -- and plotting ways of getting Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk

about even if they wouldn't work.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family -- in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him, and they didn't trust him at all. He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send him, we can afford to lose him." On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to the next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all. When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

"Merry Christmas," said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

"You, too," said Harry. "Will you look at this? I've got some presents!"

"What did you expect, turnips?" said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry's.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew it -- it sounded a bit like an owl.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

"That's friendly," said Harry.

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

"Weird!" he said, 'NMat a shape! This is money?"

"You can keep it," said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. "Hagrid and my aunt and uncle -- so who sent these?"

"I think I know who that one's from," said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. "My mom. I told her you didn't expect any presents and -- oh, no," he groaned, "she's made you a Weasley sweater."

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of homemade fudge.

"Every year she makes us a sweater," said Ron, unwrapping his own, "and mine's always maroon."

"That's really nice of her," said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

His next present also contained candy -- a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione.

This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

"I've heard of those," he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he'd gotten from Hermione. "If that's what I think it is -- they're really rare, and really valuable."

"What is it?"

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

"It's an invisibility cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is -- try it on."

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It is! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the

mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

"There's a note!" said Ron suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words: Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature. Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the cloak.

"I'd give anything for one of these," he said. "Anything. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in. Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight. He didn't feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Hey, look -- Harry's got a Weasley sweater, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

"Harry's is better than ours, though," said Fred, holding up Harry's sweater. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed. "I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid -- we know we're called Gred and Forge."

"What's all th is noise.

Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving. He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which

Fred seized.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one."

"I -- don't -- want said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today, either," said

George. "Christmas is a time for family."

They frog-marched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce -- and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside. Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice. Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet, and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's

amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of nonexplodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and his own new wizard chess set. The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris's Christmas dinner.

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor tower because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the invisibility cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him, fell asleep almost as soon as he'd drawn the curtains of his four-poster. Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father's... this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had said.

He had to try it, now. He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back -- his father's cloak -- he felt that this time -- the first time -- he wanted to use it alone.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the invisibility cloak tight around him as he walked.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books. The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Step ping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

They didn't tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn't understand. Some had no title at all. One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood. The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn't be.

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interesting-looking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence -- the book was screaming! Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming

down the corridor outside -- stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. He had been so busy getting away from the library, he hadn't paid attention to where he was going. Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a shortcut, because his soft, greasy voice was getting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied, "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him -- the cloak didn't stop him from being solid.

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was his only hope. He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it, and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything. They walked straight past, and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket -- but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*. His panic

fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed -- for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder -- but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air -- she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes -- her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green -- exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobby knees -- Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

"You could have woken me up," said Ron, crossly.

"You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror.

"I'd like to see your mom and dad," Ron said eagerly.

"And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone."

"You can see them any old time," said Ron. "Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people. Shame about not finding Flamel, though. Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating anything?"

Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

"Are you all right?" said Ron. "You look odd."

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak, too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. They tried retracing Harry's route from the library, wandering around the dark passageways for nearly an hour.

"I'm freezing," said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Harry hissed. "I know it's here somewhere."

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. Just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead

with cold, Harry spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here -- just here -- yes!"

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from around his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

"See?" Harry whispered.

"I can't see anything."

"Look! Look at them all... there are loads of them...."

"I can only see you."

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

"Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No -- I'm alone -- but I'm different -- I look older -- and I'm head boy!"

"What?"

"I am -- I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to -- and I'm holding the house cup and the Quidditch cup -- I'm Quidditch captain, too.

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"How can it? All my family are dead -- let me have another look --"

"You had it to yourself all last night, give me a bit more time."

"You're only holding the Quidditch cup, what's interesting about that? I want to see my parents."

"Don't push me --"

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their discussion. They hadn't realized how loudly they had been talking.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing -- did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

"This isn't safe -- she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on."

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

The snow still hadn't melted the next morning.

"Want to play chess, Harry?" said Ron.

"No."

"Why don't we go down and visit Hagrid?"

"No... you go..."

"I know what you're thinking about, Harry, that mirror. Don't go back tonight."

"Why not?"

"I dunno, I've just got a bad feeling about it -- and anyway, you've had too many close shaves already. Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can't see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?"

"You sound like Hermione."

"I'm serious, Harry, don't go."

But Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him.

That third night he found his way more quickly than before. He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn't meet anyone.

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

Except --

"So -- back again, Harry?"

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

" -- I didn't see you, sir."

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, Sir."

"But I expect you've realized by now what it does?"

"It -- well -- it shows me my family --"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as head boy."

"How did you know --?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently. "Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, "It shows us what we want... whatever we want..."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

"The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Harry stood up.

"Sir -- Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Dumbledore smiled. "You may ask me one more thing, however."

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

Harry stared.

"One can never have enough socks," said Dumbledore. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NICOLAS FLAMEL

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the invisibility cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk. Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light, while a high voice cackled with laughter.

"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," said Ron, when Harry told him about these dreams.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that he hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the

Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words.

"Snape's refereeing?" he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin."

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too.

"It's not my fault," said Wood. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another reason for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quidditch....

The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

"Don't talk to me for a moment," said Ron when Harry sat down next to him, "I need to concen --" He caught sight of Harry's face. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape's sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

"Don't play," said Hermione at once.

"Say you're ill," said Ron.

"Pretend to break your leg," Hermione suggested.

"Really break your leg," said Ron.

"I can't," said Harry. "There isn't a reserve Seeker. If I back out,

Gryffindor can't play at all."

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the countercurse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling. "What happened?" Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy," said Neville shakily. "I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on."

"Go to Professor McGonagall!" Hermione urged Neville. "Report him!"

Neville shook his head.

"I don't want more trouble," he mumbled.

"You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" said Ron. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that," Neville choked out.

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

"You're worth twelve of Malfoy," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin."

Neville's lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

"Thanks, Harry... I think I'll go to bed.... D'you want the card, you collect them, don't you?"

As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

"Dumbledore again," he said, "He was the first one I ever-

He gasped. He stared at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

"I've found him!" he whispered. "I've found Flamel! I told you I'd read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here -- listen to this: 'Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!'"

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework.

"Stay there!" she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light?" said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for.

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" said Ron grumpily. Hermione ignored him.

"Nicolas Flamel," she whispered dramatically, "is the only known maker of the Sorcerer's Stone!"

This didn't have quite the effect she'd expected.

"The what?" said Harry and Ron.

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read? Look -- read that, there."

She pushed the book toward them, and Harry and Ron read: The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a

legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Sorcerer's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them... it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the field," said Hermione.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to keep running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions

lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry. Could Snape possibly know they'd found out about the Sorcerer's Stone? Harry didn't see how he could -- yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.

Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's Locomotor Mortis," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Back in the locker room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

"Don't want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it's now. Finish the game before Snape can favor Hufflepuff too much."

"The whole school's out there!" said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. "Even -- blimey -- Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart did a somersault.

"Dumbledore?" he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief. He was safe. There was simply no way that Snape would dare to try to hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the field, something that Ron noticed, too.

"I've never seen Snape look so mean," he told Hermione. "Look -they're off Ouch!"

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

"Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn't see you there."

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

"Wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

"You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?" said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. "It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's Potter, who's got no parents, then there's the Weasleys, who've got no money -- you should be on the team, Longbottom, you've got no brains."

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

"I'm worth twelve of you, Malfoy," he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, "You tell him, Neville."

"Longbottom, if brains were gold you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Ron's nerves were already stretched to the breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy -- one more word

"Ron!" said Hermione suddenly, "Harry --"

"What? Where?"

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

"You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" said Malfoy.

Ron snapped. Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape -- she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches -- the next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in triumph, the Snitch clasped in his hand.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever remember the Snitch being caught so quickly.

"Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game's over! Harry's won! We've won! Gryffindor is in the lead!" shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn't believe it. He'd done it -- the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. As Gryffindors came spilling onto the field, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped -- then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumbledore's smiling face.

"Well done," said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror... been keeping busy... excellent..."

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

Harry left the locker room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn't ever remember feeling

happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now -- no one could say he was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape....

And speaking of Snape...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner -- what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves. Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"... d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Sorcerer's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I --"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, "-- your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't --"

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomfey says he'll be all right - talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this...."

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he knew how to get past

Fluffy - and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocuss-- I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through --"

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" said Hermione in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NORBERT THE NORWEGIAN RIDGEBACK

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and colorcoding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it A."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me...."

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up "Dittany" in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?" "Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Sorcerer's St --"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Harry, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy --"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen - come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh --"

"See you later, then," said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him," said Harry.

"But it's against our laws," said Ron. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" said Harry.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earths Hagrid up to?" said Hermione.

When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called "Who is it?" before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

"So -- yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," said Harry. There was no point beating around the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Sorcerer's Stone apart from Fluffy."

Hagrid frowned at him.

"O' course I cant, he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn' tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It Was almost stolen outta Gringotts - I s'ppose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know about Fluffy."

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. "We only wondered who had done the guarding, really." Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione.

"Well, I don' s'pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that... let's see... he borrowed Fluffy from me... then some o' the teachers did enchantments... Professor Sprout -- Professor Flitwick -- Professor McGonagall --" he ticked them off on his fingers, "Professor Quirrell -- an' Dumbledore himself did somethin', o' course. Hang on, I've forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape."

"Snape?"

"Yeah -- yer not still on about that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he's not about ter steal it."

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything -- except, it seemed, Quirrell's spell and how to get past Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy. aren't you, Hagrid?" said Harry anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?"

"Not a soul knows except me an' Dumbledore," said Hagrid proudly.

"Well, that's something," Harry muttered to the others. "Hagrid, can we

have a window open? I'm boiling."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it, too.

"Hagrid -- what's that?"

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's er..."

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin' , said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library -- Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit -- it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here -- how ter recognize diffrent eggs -- what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn't.

"Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," she said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut. "Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life," Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra homework they were getting. Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn't hear of it.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons, we'll get into trouble, and that's nothing to what Hagrid's going to be in when someone finds out what he's doing --"

"Shut up!" Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on Malfoy's face at all.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid's with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

"It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face -- he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains -- it's a kid -- he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy's face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

"Just let him go," Harry urged. "Set him free."

"I can't," said Hagrid. "He's too little. He'd die."

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn't been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. "He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?"

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

"Hagrid," said Harry loudly, "give it two weeks and Norbert's going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment."

Hagrid bit his lip.

"I -- I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't jus' dump him, I can't."

Harry suddenly turned to Ron. "Charlie, he said."

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No -- Charlie -- your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it, Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send -an owl to Charlie to ask him.

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just

chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's invisibility cloak. He had been down at Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

There was a tap on the dark window.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!"

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter -- I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing

will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another.

"We've got the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It shouldn't be too difficult -- I think the cloaks big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert -- and Malfoy.

There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn't know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey -- would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert's fangs were poisonous.

Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

"It's not just my hand," he whispered, "although that feels like it's about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me -- I've told her it was a dog, but I don't think she believes me -I shouldn't have hit him at the Quidditch match, that's why he's doing this."

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

"It'll all be over at midnight on Saturday," said Hermione, but this didn't soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke

into a sweat.

"Midnight on Saturday!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Oh no oh no -- I've just remembered -- Charlie's letter was in that book Malfoy took, he's going to know we're getting rid of Norbert."

Harry and Hermione didn't get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

"It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that."

They found Fang, the boarhound, sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

"I won't let you in," he puffed. "Norbert's at a tricky stage -- nothin' I can't handle."

When they told him about Charlie's letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

"Aargh! It's all right, he only got my boot -- jus' playin' -- he's only a baby, after all."

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall. Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as

though the teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mommy will never forget you!"

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. UP another staircase, then another -- even one of Harry's shortcuts didn't make the work much easier.

"Nearly there!" Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you --"

"You don't understand, Professor. Harry Potter's coming -- he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on -- I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!"

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they'd stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

"Malfoy's got detention! I could sing!"

"Don't," Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out

of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going... going... gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon -- Malfoy in detention -- what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

They'd left the invisibility cloak on top of the tower.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE FORIBIDDEN FOREST

Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak? There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes. Add Norbert and the invisibility cloak, and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn't have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Harry!" Neville burst out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag --"

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. Explain yourselves."

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

"I think I've got a good idea of what's been going on," said Professor McGonagall. "It doesn't take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I've already caught him. I suppose you think it's funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?"

Harry caught Neville's eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn't true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville -- Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

"I'm disgusted," said Professor McGonagall. "Four students out of bed in one night! I've never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions -- yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous -- and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor."

"Fifty?" Harry gasped -- they would lose the lead, the lead he'd won in the last Quidditch match.

"Fifty points each," said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long, pointed nose.

"Professor -- please

"You can't --"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I've never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students."

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they'd ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

Harry didn't sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn't think of anything to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they'd done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the house points the next day thought there'd been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Potter, the famous Harry Potter, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first years.

From being one of the most popular and admired people at the school, Harry was suddenly the most hated. Even Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on him, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the house cup. Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, "Thanks Potter, we owe you one!"

Only Ron stood by him.

"They'll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they've been here, and people still like them."

"They've never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?" said Harry miserably.

"Well -- no," Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren't his business from now on. He'd had it

with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

"Resign?" Wood thundered. "What good'll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can't win at Quidditch?"

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team wouldn't speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him "the Seeker."

Hermione and Neville were suffering, too. They didn't have as bad a time as Harry, because they weren't as well-known, but nobody would speak to them, either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Harry was almost glad that the exams weren't far away. All the studying he had to do kept his mind off his misery. He, Ron, and Hermione kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart, memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions....

Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Harry's new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn't concern him was put to an unexpected test. Walking back from the library on his own one afternoon, he heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As he drew closer, he heard Quirrell's voice.

"No -- no -- not again, please --"

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Harry moved closer.

"All right -- all right --" he heard Quirrell sob.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry. He strode out of sight; Harry didn't think Quirrell had even noticed him. He waited until Quirrell's footsteps had disappeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Harry was halfway toward it before he remembered what he'd promised himself about not meddling.

All the same, he'd have gambled twelve Sorcerer's Stones that Snape had just left the room, and from what Harry had just heard, Snape would be

walking with a new spring in his step -- Quirrell seemed to have given in at last.

Harry went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Harry told them what he'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell --"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron's eyes, but Hermione answered before Harry could.

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure."

"But we've got no proof!" said Harry. "Quirrell's too scared to back us up. Snape's only got to say he doesn't know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor -- who do you think they'll believe, him or us? It's not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore'll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn't help us if his life depended on it, he's too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he'll think. And don't forget, we're not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That'll take a lot of explaining."

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn't.

"If we just do a bit of poking around --"

"No," said Harry flatly, "we've done enough poking around."

He pulled a map of Jupiter toward him and started to learn the names of its moons.

The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry, Hermione, and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight. Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor McGonagall Harry had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they'd lost. He half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of studying lost, but she didn't say a word. Like Harry, she felt they deserved what they'd got.

At eleven o'clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there -- and so was Malfoy. Harry had also forgotten that Malfoy had gotten a detention, too.

"Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me.... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed.... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn't be sounding so delighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. His relief must have showed in his face, because Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy -- it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Neville let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual.
"We can't go in there at night -- there's all sorts of things in there -- werewolves, I heard."

Neville clutched the sleeve of Harry's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, they're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest, he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yehve got ter pay fer it."

"But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do. I thought we'd be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he'd

tell yer that's how it is at Hogwarts," Hagrid growled. "Copyin' lines! What good's that ter anyone? Yeh'll do summat useful or Yeh'll get out. If yeh think yer father'd rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an' pack. Go on"

Malfoy didn't move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight, an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

"Look there," said Hagrid, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid. "An' keep ter the path. Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"I want Fang," said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang's long teeth.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid. " So me, Harry, an' Hermione'll go one way an' Draco, Neville, an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practice now -- that's it -- an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh -- so, be careful -- let's go."

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville, and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue

blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

"Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?" Harry asked.

"Not fast enough," said Hagrid. "It's not easy ter catch a unicorn, they're powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before."

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

"You all right, Hermione?" Hagrid whispered. "Don' worry, it can't've gone far if it's this badly hurt, an' then we'll be able ter -- GET BEHIND THAT TREE!"

Hagrid seized Harry and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it, " he murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn' be."

"A werewolf?" Harry suggested.

"That wasn' no werewolf an' it wasn' no unicorn, neither," said Hagrid grimly. "Right, follow me, but careful, now."

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

"Who's there?" Hagrid called. "Show yerself -- I'm armed!"

And into the clearing came -- was it a man, or a horse? To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione's jaws dropped.

"Oh, it's you, Ronan," said Hagrid in relief. "How are yeh?"

He walked forward and shook the centaur's hand.

"Good evening to you, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Can't be too careful, Ronan," said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. "There's summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter an' Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An' this is Ronan, you two. He's a centaur.))

"We'd noticed," said Hermione faintly.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm --"

"A bit," said Hermione timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, glancing up, too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run inter yeh, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn bin hurt -- you seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upward, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "but have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated, while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

"Yeah, but I was meanin' anythin' unusual a bit nearer home, said Hagrid. "So yeh haven't noticed anythin' strange?"

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, "The forest hides many secrets."

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and -bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane," said Hagrid. "All right?"

"Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Look, I've jus' bin askin' Ronan, you seen anythin' odd in here lately? There's a unicorn bin injured -- would yeh know anythin' about it?"

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skyward. "Mars is bright tonight," he said simply.

"We've heard," said Hagrid grumpily. "Well, if either of you do see anythin', let me know, won't yeh? We'll be off, then."

Harry and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

"Never," said Hagrid irritably, "try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon."

"Are there many of them in here?" asked Hermione.

"Oh, a fair few... Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they're good enough about turnin' up if ever I want a word. They're deep, mind, centaurs... they know things... jus' don' let on much."

"D'you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?" said Harry.

"Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what's bin killin' the unicorns -- never heard anythin' like it before."

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Harry kept looking nervously over his shoulder. He had the nasty feeling they were being watched. He was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Hermione grabbed Hagrid's arm.

"Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!"

"You two wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay on the path, I'll come back for yeh!"

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn't hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

"You don't think they've been hurt, do you?" whispered Hermione.

"I don't care if Malfoy has, but if something's got Neville... it's our fault he's here in the first place."

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Harry's seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid's return. Malfoy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Neville and grabbed him as a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you two were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups -- Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' this idiot. I'm sorry," Hagrid added in a whisper to Harry, "but he'll have a harder time frightenin' you, an' we've gotta get this done."

So Harry set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick. Harry thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

"Look --" he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on

the dark leaves.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered.... Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted -- so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry -- unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Harry -- he couldn't move for fear.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head; it was as though his scar were on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backward. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over Harry, charging at the figure.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

"Are you all right?" said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

"Yes -- thank you -- what was that?"

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time -- especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way.

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks

heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best, " he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but did not answer Harry's question. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn't want to talk to him anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used -for?"

"No," said Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry stared at the back of Firenze's head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

"But who'd be that desperate?" he wondered aloud. "If you're going to be cursed forever, death's better, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze agreed, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else -- something that will bring you back to full strength and power -- something that will mean you can never die. Mr. Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

"The Sorcerer's Stone! Of course -- the Elixir of Life! But I don't understand who --"

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry's heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: "Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die."

"Do you mean," Harry croaked, "that was Vol-"

"Harry! Harry, are you all right?"

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along

behind her.

"I'm fine," said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying. "The unicorn's dead, Hagrid, it's in that clearing back there."

"This is where I leave you," Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. "You are safe now."

Harry slid off his back.

"Good luck, Harry Potter," said Firenze. "The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leaving Harry shivering behind him.

Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Harry roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

"Snape wants the stone for Voldemort... and Voldemort's waiting in the forest... and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich...."

"Stop saying the name!" said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done so.... Bane was furious... he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen.... They must show that Voldemort's coming back.... Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me.... I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

"Will you stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone," Harry

went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off... Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of comfort.

"Harry, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed exhausted, their throats sore. But the night's surprises weren't over.

When Harry pulled back his sheets, he found his invisibility cloak folded neatly underneath them. There was a note pinned to it:

Just in case.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR

In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an AntiCheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tapdance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox -- points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because Harry couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by

his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented selfstirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows. "No more studying," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

"I wish I knew what this means!" he burst out angrily. "My scar keeps hurting -- it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," said Harry. "I think it's a warning... it means danger's coming...."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

"Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as

Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important. When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn't have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was the only one who ever sent him letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy... never... but --

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Where're you going?" said Ron sleepily.

"I've just thought of something," said Harry. He had turned white.
"We've got to go and see Hagrid, now."

"Why?" panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, "that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it's against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? Why didn't I see it before?"

"What are you talking about?" said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn't answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

"No, we're in a hurry. Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know

that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?"

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

"It's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head -- that's the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas. "What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

"Mighta come up," said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah... he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here.... He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I took after... so I told him... an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon... an' then... I can't remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks.... Let's see... yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted... but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn't want it ter go ter any old home.... So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy..."

"And did he -- did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Well -- yeah -- how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep --"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey -- where're yeh goin'?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that

cloak -- it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to --" Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry and Ron thought.

"See Professor Dumbledore?" Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. "Why?"

Harry swallowed -- now what?

"It's sort of secret," he said, but he wished at once he hadn't, because Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared.

"Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago," she said coldly. "He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

"He's gone?" said Harry frantically. "Now?"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time --

"But this is important."

"Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Potter.

"Look," said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, "Professor -- it's about the Sorcerer's tone --"

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn't that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn't pick them up. "How do you know --?" she spluttered.

"Professor, I think -- I know -- that Sn- that someone's going to try and steal the Stone. I've got to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

"Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. I don't know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it's too well protected."

"But Professor --"

"Potter, I know what I'm talking about," she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

But they didn't.

"It's tonight," said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. "Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs, and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up."

"But what can we --"

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

Snape was standing there.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"We were --" Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around

like this, people will think you're up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Harry flushed. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

"Be warned, Potter -- any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others.

"Right, here's what we've got to do," he whispered urgently. "One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape -- wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you'd better do that."

"Why me?"

"It's obvious," said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know." He put on a high voice, "'Oh Professor Flitwick, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong...'"

"Oh, shut up," said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

"And we'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor," Harry told Ron. "Come on."

But that part of the plan didn't work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

"I suppose you think you're harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!" she stormed. "Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you 've come anywhere near here again, I'll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!" Harry and Ron went back to the common room, Harry had just said, "At least Hermione's on Snape's tail," when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she wailed. "Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him,

and I've only just got away, I don't know where Snape went."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it?" Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

"I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."

"You're mad!" said Ron.

"You can't!" said Hermione. "After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"

"SO WHAP" Harry shouted. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back! Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn't matter anymore, can't you see? D'you think he'll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it's only dying a bit later than I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side! I'm going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?"

He glared at them.

"You're right Harry," said Hermione in a small voice.

"I'll use the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It's just lucky I got it back."

"But will it cover all three of us?" said Ron.

"All -- all three of us?"

"Oh, come off it, you don't think we'd let you go alone?"

"Of course not," said Hermione briskly. "How do you think you'd get to the Stone without us? I'd better go and look through my books, there might be something useful..."

"But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too."

"Not if I can help it," said Hermione grimly. "Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They're not throwing me out after that."

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Harry any more, after all. This was the first night he hadn't been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Harry and Ron didn't talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

"Better get the cloak," Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormitory. He putted out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy -- he didn't feel much like singing.

He ran back down to the common room.

"We'd better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us -- if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own --"

"What are you doing?" said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he'd been making another bid for freedom.

"Nothing, Neville, nothing," said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

"You're going out again," he said.

"No, no, no," said Hermione. "No, we're not. Why don't you go to bed, Neville?"

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

"You can't go out," said Neville, "you'll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble."

"You don't understand," said Harry, "this is important."

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

"I won't let you do it," he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. "I'll -- I'll fight you!"

"Neville, Ron exploded, "get away from that hole and don't be an idiot --"

"Don't you call me an idiot!" said Neville. "I don't think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!"

"Yes, but not to us," said Ron in exasperation. "Neville, you don't know what you're doing."

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

"Go on then, try and hit me!" said Neville, raising his fists. "I'm ready!"

Harry turned to Hermione.

"Do something," he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Neville," she said, "I'm really, really sorry about this."

She raised her wand.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

"What've you done to him?" Harry whispered.

"It's the full Body-Bind," said Hermione miserably. "Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We had to, Neville, no time to explain," said Harry.

"You'll understand later, Neville," said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the invisibility cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn't feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue's shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them. At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

"Oh, let's kick her, just this once," Ron whispered in Harry's ear, but Harry shook his head. As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamplike eyes on them, but didn't do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

"Should call Filch, I should, if something's a-creeping around unseen."

Harry had a sudden idea.

"Peeves," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible."

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

"So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, Sir," he said greasily. "My mistake, my mistake -- I didn't see you -- of course I didn't, you're invisible -- forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir."

"I have business here, Peeves," croaked Harry. "Stay away from this place tonight."

"I will, sir, I most certainly will," said Peeves, rising up in the air again. "Hope your business goes well, Baron, I'll not bother you."

And he scooted off

"Brilliant, Harry!" whispered Ron.

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor -- and the door was already ajar.

"Well, there you are," Harry said quietly, "Snape's already got past Fluffy."

Seeing the open door somehow seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you," he said. "You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron.

"We're coming," said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog's noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn't see them.

"What's that at its feet?" Hermione whispered.

"Looks like a harp," said Ron. "Snape must have left it there."

"It must wake up the moment you stop playing," said Harry. "Well, here goes..."

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. It wasn't really a tune, but from the first note the beast's eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog's growls ceased -- it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog's hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads. "I think we'll be able to pull the door open," said Ron, peering over the dog's back. "Want to go first, Hermione?"

"No, I don't!"

"All right." Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog's legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

"What can you see?" Hermione said anxiously.

"Nothing -- just black -- there's no way of climbing down, we'll just have to drop."

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his attention and pointed at himself.

"You want to go first? Are you sure?" said Ron. "I don't know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep."

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds' silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, "If anything happens to me, don't follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?"

"Right," said Ron.

"See you in a minute, I hope..."

And Harry let go. Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and -- FLUMP. With a funny, muffled sort of thump he landed on something soft. He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"It's okay!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor, "it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Ron followed right away. He landed, sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry's other side.

"We must be miles under the school, she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"Lucky!" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is -- it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his neck. "Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Hermione.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" Harry gasped, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare... what did Professor Sprout say? -- it likes the dark and the damp

"So light a fire!" Harry choked.

"Yes -- of course -- but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

"Oh, right!" said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

"Yeah," said Ron, "and lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis -- 'there's no wood,' honestly."

"This way," said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards' bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon -- Norbert had been bad enough...

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"I don't know... sounds like wings to me."

"There's light ahead -- I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Ron.

"Probably," said Harry. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once... well, there's no other choice... I'll run."

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened. He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm.

"Now what?" said Ron.

"These birds... they can't be here just for decoration," said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering -- glittering?

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys -- look carefully. So that must mean..." he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "... yes -- look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one -- probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the

bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. After a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" he called to the others. "That big one -- there -- no, there -- with bright blue wings -- the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above -- Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand. Ron and Hermione's cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly, and Harry ran to the door, the key struggling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned -- it worked. The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door handle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shivered slightly -- the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"Now what do we do?" Harry whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

"Do we -- er -- have to join you to get across?" The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

"This needs thinking about," he said. "I suppose we've got to take the place of three of the black pieces...."

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess --"

"We're not offended," said Harry quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, YOU 90 next to him instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board. "Yes... look..."

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry's knees were trembling. What if they lost?

"Harry -- move diagonally four squares to the right."

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

"Had to let that happen," said Ron, looking shaken. "Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on."

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

"We're nearly there," he muttered suddenly. "Let me think let me think..."

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

"Yes..." said Ron softly, "It's the only way... I've got to be taken."

"NO! Harry and Hermione shouted.

"That's chess!" snapped Ron. "You've got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she'll take me -- that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But --"

"Do you want to stop Snape or not?"

"Ron --"

"Look, if you don't hurry up, he'll already have the Stone!"

There was no alternative.

"Ready?" Ron called, his face pale but determined. "Here I go - now,

don't hang around once you've won."

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor - Hermione screamed but stayed on her square - the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he'd been knocked out.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry's feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

"What if he's --?"

"He'll be all right," said Harry, trying to convince himself. "What do you reckon's next?"

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's."

They had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered.

"Go on."

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. "Come on, I can't breathe."

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next - but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

"Snape's," said Harry. "What do we have to do?"

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn't ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

"Brilliant," said Hermione. "This isn't magic -- it's logic -- a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?" "Of course not," said Hermione. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire -- toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

"There's only enough there for one of us," he said. "That's hardly one swallow."

They looked at each other.

"Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You drink that," said Harry. "No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying- key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy -- go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really."

"But Harry -- what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well -- I was lucky once, wasn't I?" said Harry, pointing at his scar.

"I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry -- you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you," said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

"Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things -- friendship and bravery and -- oh Harry -- be careful!"

"You drink first," said Harry. "You are sure which is which, aren't you?"

"Positive," said Hermione. She took a long drink from the round bottle at the end, and shuddered.

"It's not poison?" said Harry anxiously.

"No -- but it's like ice."

"Quick, go, before it wears off."

"Good luck -- take care."

"GO!"

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

"Here I come," he said, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn't feel them -- for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire -- then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there -- but it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

It was Quirrell.

"You!" gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

"Me," he said calmly. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter."

"But I thought -- Snape --"

"Severus?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

"But Snape tried to kill me!"

"No, no, no. I tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I'd have got you off that broom. I'd have managed it before then if Snape hadn't been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you."

"Snape was trying to save me?"

"Of course," said Quirrell coolly. "Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn't do it again. Funny, really... he needn't have bothered. I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning, he did make himself unpopular... and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in?"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls -- you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off -- and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror.

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this... but he's in London... I'll be far away by the time he gets back...."

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest --" he blurted out.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me - as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side...."

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone... I'm presenting it to my master... but where is it?"

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn't give. He

had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

"But Snape always seemed to hate me so much."

"Oh, he does," said Quirrell casually, "heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead."

"But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing -- I thought Snape was threatening you...."

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell's face.

"Sometimes," he said, "I find it hard to follow my master's instructions -- he is a great wizard and I am weak --"

"You mean he was there in the classroom with you?" Harry gasped.

"He is with me wherever I go," said Quirrell quietly. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.... Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me." Quirrell shivered suddenly. "He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me... decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me...."

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley -how could he have been so stupid? He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand... is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it -- which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up

to?

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself. "What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself

"Use the boy... Use the boy..."

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

"Yes -- Potter -- come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. I must look and lie about what I see, that's all.

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket -- and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow -- incredibly -- he'd gotten the Stone.

"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry screwed up his courage.

"I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he invented. "I -- I've won the house cup for Gryffindor."

Quirrell cursed again.

"Get out of the way," he said. As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

But he hadn't walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips.

"He lies... He lies..."

"Potter, come back here!" Quirrell shouted. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again.

"Let me speak to him... face-to-face..."

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough... for this...."

Harry felt as if Devil's Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell's head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"Harry Potter..." it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn't move.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another's body... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds.... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own.... Now... why don't you give

me that Stone in your pocket?"

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backward.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me... or you'll meet the same end as your parents.... They died begging me for mercy..."

"LIAR!" Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backward at him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching..." it hissed. "I always value bravery... Yes, boy, your parents were brave.... I killed your father first; and he put up a courageous fight... but your mother needn't have died... she was trying to protect you.... Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

"NEVER!"

Harry sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed "SEIZE HIM!" and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell's hand close on his wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry's scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him. The pain in his head lessened -- he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers -- they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet' landing on top of him, both hands around Harry's neck -- Harry's scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

"Master, I cannot hold him -- my hands -- my hands!"

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms -- Harry could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

"Then kill him, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell's face --

"AAAARGH!"

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain -- his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off -- the pain in Harry's head was building -- he couldn't see -- he could only hear Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, maybe in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

He felt Quirrell's arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down ... down... down...

Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy.

He blinked. It wasn't the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

He blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him.

"Good afternoon, Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Sir, quick --"

"Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sir, I --"

"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out.

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next

to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," said Dumbledore, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Mistery Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it."

"How long have I been in here?"

"Three days. Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried."

"But sit, the Stone

I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say.

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?"

"We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you."

"It was you."

"I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were, I couldn't have kept him off the Stone much longer --"

"Not the Stone, boy, you -- the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" said Harry blankly. "But your friend -- Nicolas Flamel --"

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it's all for the best."

"But that means he and his wife will die, won't they?"

"They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die."

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry's face.

"To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all -- the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them." Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

"Sir?" said Harry. "I've been thinking... sir -- even if the Stone's gone, Vol-, I mean, You-Know- Who --"

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort's going to try other ways of coming back, isn't he? I mean, he hasn't gone, has he?"

"No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share... not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time -- and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power."

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, "Sir, there are some other things I'd like to know, if you can tell me... things I want to know the truth about...."

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you'll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie."

"Well... Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?"

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time.

"Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day... put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older... I know you hate to hear this... when you are ready, you will know."

And Harry knew it would be no good to argue.

"But why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

Dumbledore now became very interested in a bird out on the windowsill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet. When he had found his voice again, Harry said, "And the invisibility cloak - do you know who sent it to me?"

"Ah - your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Useful things... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here."

"And there's something else..."

"Fire away."

"Quirrell said Snape --"

"Professor Snape, Harry." "Yes, him -- Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?"

"Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive."

"What?"

"He saved his life."

"What?"

"Yes..." said Dumbledore dreamily. "Funny, the way people's minds work, isn't it? Professor Snape couldn't bear being in your father's debt.... I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace...."

Harry tried to understand this but it made his head pound, so he stopped.

"And sir, there's one more thing..."

"Just the one?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, now, I'm glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone -- find it, but not use it -- would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes.... Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomitflavored one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them -- but I think I'll be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?"

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, "Alas! Ear wax!"

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was a nice woman, but very strict.

"Just five minutes," Harry pleaded.

"Absolutely not."

"You let Professor Dumbledore in..."

"Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. You need rest."

"I am resting, look, lying down and everything. Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey..."

"Oh, very well," she said. "But five minutes only."

And she let Ron and Hermione in.

"Harry!"

Hermione looked ready to fling her arms around him again, but Harry was glad she held herself in as his head was still very sore.

"Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to -- Dumbledore was so worried --"

"The whole school's talking about it," said Ron. "What really happened?"

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Harry told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Ron and Hermione were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Harry told them what was under Quirrell's turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

"So the Stone's gone?" said Ron finally. "Flamel's just going to die?"

"That's what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that -- what was it? -- 'to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."

"I always said he was off his rocker," said Ron, looking quite impressed at how crazy his hero was.

"So what happened to you two?" said Harry.

"Well, I got back all right," said Hermione. "I brought Ron round -- that took a while -- and we were dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall -- he already knew -- he just said, 'Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?' and hurtled off to the

third floor."

"D'you think he meant you to do it?" said Ron. "Sending you your father's cloak and everything?"

"Well, " Hermione exploded, "if he did -- I mean to say that's terrible -- you could have been killed."

"No, it isn't," said Harry thoughtfully. "He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could...."

"Yeah, Dumbledore's off his rocker, all right," said Ron proudly. "Listen, you've got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course -- you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you -- but the food'll be good."

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

"You've had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT" she said firmly.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

I want to go to the feast," he told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. "I can, can't I?"

"Professor Dumbledore says you are to be allowed to go," she said stiffly, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn't realize how risky feasts could be. "And you have another visitor."

"Oh, good," said Harry. "Who is it?"

Hagrid sidled through the door as he spoke. As usual when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Harry, took one look at him, and burst into tears.

"It's -- all -- my -- ruddy -- fault!" he sobbed, his face in his hands. "I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only

thing he didn't know, an' I told him! Yeh could've died! All fer a dragon egg! I'll never drink again! I should be chucked out an' made ter live as a Muggle!"

"Hagrid!" said Harry, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. "Hagrid, he'd have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we're talking about, he'd have found out even if you hadn't told him."

"Yeh could've died!" sobbed Hagrid. "An' don' say the name!"

"VOLDEMORT!" Harry bellowed, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped crying. "I've met him and I'm calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it's gone, he can't use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I've got loads...."

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, "That reminds me. I've got yeh a present."

"It's not a stoat sandwich, is it?" said Harry anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle. "Nah. Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. 'Course, he shoulda sacked me instead -- anyway, got yeh this..."

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Harry opened it curiously. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at him from every page were his mother and father.

"Sent owls off ter all yer parents' old school friends, askin' fer photos... knew yeh didn' have any... d'yeh like it?"

Harry couldn't speak, but Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey's fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin's winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were

standing up to look at him.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts...."

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy- two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

"Yes, Yes, well done, Slytherin," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Slytherins' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes..."

"First -- to Mr. Ronald Weasley..."

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

"...for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

At last there was silence again.

"Second -- to Miss Hermione Granger... for the use of cool logic in the

face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears. Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves -- they were a hundred points up. "Third -- to Mr. Harry Potter..." said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points -- exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the house cup -- if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn't have looked more stunned and horrified if he'd just had the Body-Bind Curse put on him.

"Which means, Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, "we need a little change of decoration."

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible, forced smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew at once that Snape's feelings toward him hadn't changed one jot. This didn't worry Harry. It seemed as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

It was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls... he would

never, ever forget tonight.

Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years. Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the countryside became greener and tidier; eating Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you -- I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Harry, "I'll need something to look forward to." People jostled them as they moved forward toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:

"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"Still famous," said Ron, grinning at him.

"Not where I'm going, I promise you," said Harry.

He, Ron, and Hermione passed through the gateway together. "There he is, Mom, there he is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, Ron's younger sister, but she wasn't pointing at Ron.

"Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point."

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them.

"Busy year?" she said.

"Very," said Harry. "Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"Ready, are you?"

It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Mrs. Weasley.

"In a manner of speaking," said Uncle Vernon. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He walked away.

Harry hung back for a last word with Ron and Hermione.

"See you over the summer, then."

"Hope you have -- er -- a good holiday," said Hermione, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

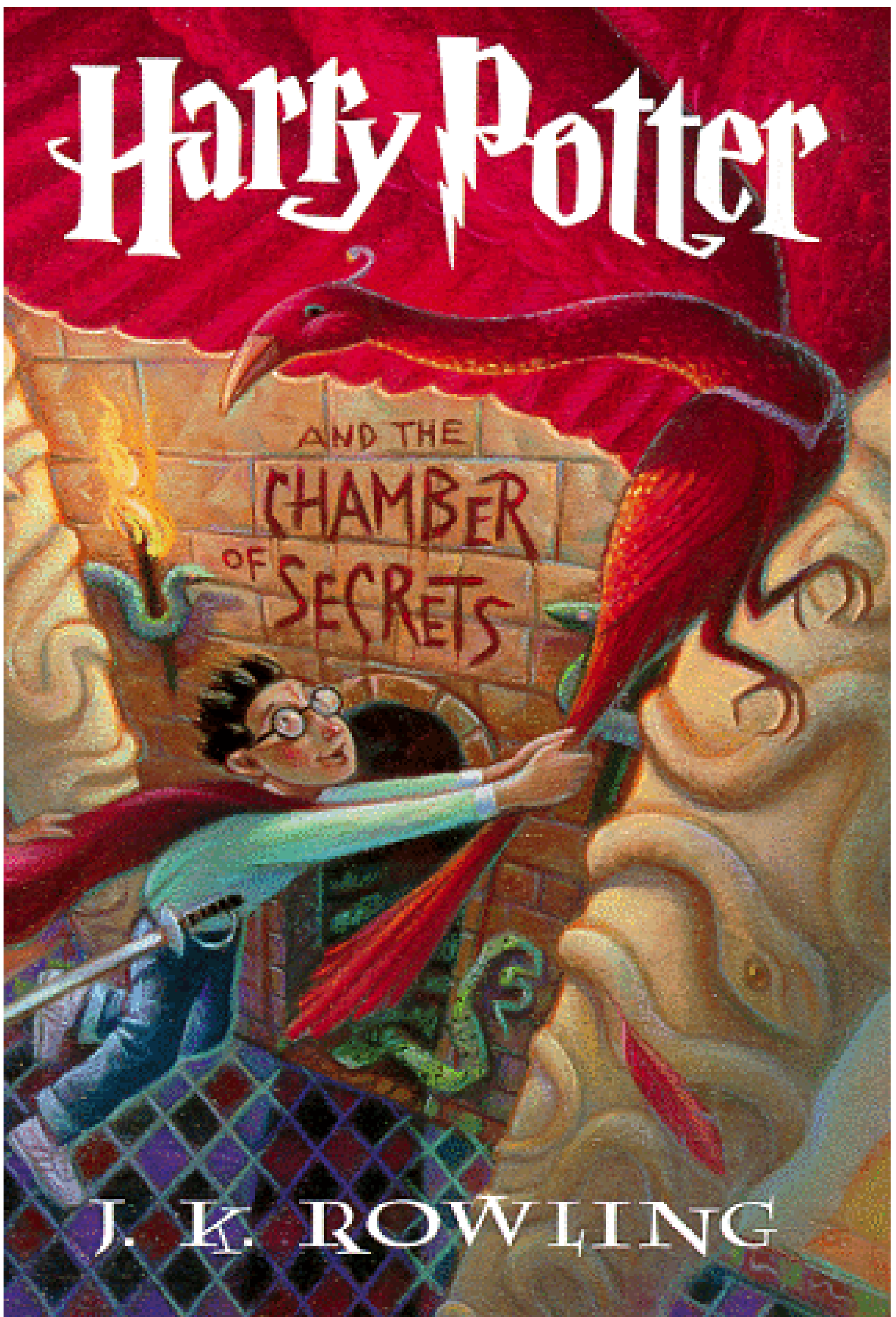
"Oh, I will," said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face. "They don't know we're not allowed to use magic at home. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

THE END

Harry Potter

AND THE
CHAMBER
OF
SECRETS

J. K. ROWLING



HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

by
J. K. Rowling

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C H A P T E R O N E

THE WORST BIRTHDAY

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr. Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's bored," he said. "She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night -"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy mustache. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

"I want more bacon."

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance I don't like the sound of that school food

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when I was at Smeltings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

"Pass the frying pan."

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant `please!'" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean -"

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE `M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"But I -"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

"I just -"

"I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!"

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

"All right," said Harry, "all right. . . "

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Uncle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry Potter wasn't a normal boy. As a matter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard - a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomachache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the mail arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleeping in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin next to the Forbidden Forest in the grounds, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, and fourteen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron, and top-of-the-line Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place on the House Quidditch team because he hadn't practiced all summer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wizards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins),

and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deepest shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in the wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black mustache; Aunt Petunia

was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink, and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one year old, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest Dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's parents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow - nobody understood why Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never understanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash that had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry,

and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous ... but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a real present, let alone a cake - but to ignore it completely ...

At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, "Now, as we all know, today is a very important day."

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career, "

said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. Of course, he thought bitterly, Uncle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party. He'd been talking of nothing else for two weeks. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Uncle Vernon. "We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be -?"

"In the lounge," said Aunt Petunia promptly, "waiting to welcome them graciously to our home."

"Good, good. And Dudley?"

"I'll be waiting to open the door." Dudley put on a foul, simpering smile. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"They'll love him!" cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

"Excellent, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. "And you?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry tonelessly.

"Exactly," said Uncle Vernon nastily. "I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them -drinks. At eight-fifteen -"

"I'll announce dinner," said Aunt Petunia.

"And, Dudley, you'll say -"

"May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason?" said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

"My perfect little gentleman!" sniffed Aunt Petunia.

"And you?" said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry dully.

"Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?"

"Vernon tells me you're a wonderful golfer, Mr. Mason.... Do tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs. Mason

"Perfect. . . Dudley?"

"How about -'We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr. Mason, and I wrote about you.'"

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn't see him laughing.

"And you, boy?"

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," he said.

"Too right, you will," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "The Masons don't know anything about you and it's going to stay that way. When dinner's over, you take Mrs. Mason back to the lounge for coffee, Petunia, and I'll bring the subject around to drills. With any luck, I'll have the deal signed and sealed before the news at ten. be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca this time to morrow.

Harry couldn't feel too excited about this. He didn't think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did on Privet Drive.

"Right - I'm off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And you," he snarled at Harry. "You stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning."

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench, and sang under his breath:

"Happy birthday to me ... happy birthday to me. . .

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the

Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking him in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal - and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his archenemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream

Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to regain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time, but it had been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, wondering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge - and the hedge was staring back. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the

lawn.

"I know what day it is," sang Dudley, waddling toward him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

"What?" said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

"I know what day it is," Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

"Well done," said Harry. "So you've finally learned the days of the week."

"Today's your birthday," sneered Dudley. "How come you haven't got any cards? Haven't you even got friends at that freak place?"

"Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school," said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

"Why're you staring at the hedge?" he said suspiciously.

"I , m trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire," said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backward at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

"You c-can't - Dad told you you're not to do m-magic - he said he'll chuck you out of the house - and you haven't got anywhere else to go - you haven't got any friends to take you -"

"Jiggery pokery!" said Harry in a fierce voice. "Hocus pocus squiggly wiggly -"

"MUUUUUM!" howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back toward the house. "MUUUUM! He's doing you know what!"

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn't really

done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn't eat again until he'd finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice cream, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned and watered the roses, and repainted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn't have risen to Dudley's bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself... maybe he didn't have any friends at Hogwarts

Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now, he thought savagely as he spread manure on the flower beds, his back aching, sweat running down his face.

It was half past seven ,in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

"Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!"

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top of the fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A loin of roast pork was sizzling in the oven.

"Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!" snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate.

"Upstairs! Hurry!"

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the door bell rang and Uncle Vernon's furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Remember, boy - one sound -"

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

CHAPTER TWO

I

DOBBY'S WARNING

arry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

"May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and leg-holes.

"Er - hello," said Harry nervously.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir ... Such an honor it is"

"Th-thank you," said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, "What are you?" but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, "Who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf," said the creature.

"Oh - really?" said Harry. "Er - I don't want to be rude or anything, but - this isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom."

Aunt Petunias high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

"Not that I'm not pleased to meet you," said Harry quickly, "but, er, is there any particular reason you're here?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Dobby earnestly. "Dobby has come to tell you, sir ... it is difficult, sir ... Dobby wonders where to begin"

"Sit down," said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears - very noisy tears.

"S-sit down!" he wailed. "Never ... never ever. . . ."

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I didn't mean to offend you or anything -"

"Offend Dobby!" choked the elf. "Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard - like an equal-"

Harry, trying to say "Shh!" and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccupping, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of watery adoration.

"You can't have met many decent wizards," said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

"Don't - what are you doing?" Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed - Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

"Dobby had to punish himself, sir," said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir"

"Your family?"

"The wizard family Dobby serves, sir... DOBBY'S is a houseelf - bound to serve one house and one family forever"

"Do they know you're here?" asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

"Oh, no, sir, no ... Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir _"

"But won't they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?"

"Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments

"But why don't you leave? Escape?"

"A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free ... Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir"

Harry stared.

"And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks,"

he said. "This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can't anyone help you? Can't I?"

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn't spoken. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

"Please," Harry whispered frantically, "please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you're here -"

"Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby ... Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, "Whatever you've heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I'm not even top of my year at Hogwarts; that's Hermione, she -"

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

"I-Tarry Potter is humble and modest," said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. "Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -"

"Voldemort?" said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, "Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!"

"Sorry" said Harry quickly. "I know lots of people don't like it. My friend Ron -"

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned toward Harry, his eyes wide as headlights.

'Dobby heard tell," he said hoarsely, "that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time just weeks ago ... that Harry Potter escaped Yet again. "

Harry nodded and Dobby's eyes suddenly shone with tears.

,Ah, sir," he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby

pillowcase he was wearing. "Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later... Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"W-what?" Harry stammered. "But I've got to go back - term starts on September first. It's all that's keeping me going. You don't know what it's like here. I don't belong here. I belong in your world - at Hogwarts."

"No, no, no," squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

"Why?" said Harry in surprise.

"There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year," whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. "Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!"

"What terrible things?" said Harry at once. "Who's plotting them?"

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head frantically against the wall.

"All right!" cried Harry, grabbing the elf's arm to stop him. "You can't tell me. I understand. But why are you warning me?" A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. "Hang on - this hasn't got anything to do with Vol- - sorry - with You-Know-Who, has it?"

You could just shake or nod," he added hastily as Dobby's head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

"Not -not He- Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sir ="

But Dobby's eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

"He hasn't got a brother, has he?"

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

"Well then, I can't think who else would have a chance of making horrible things happen at Hogwarts," said Harry. "I mean, there's Dumbledore, for one thing - you know who Dumbledore is, don't you?"

Dobby bowed his head.

"Albus Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his

strength. But, sir" - Dobby's voice dropped to an urgent whisper -
"there are powers Dumbledore doesn't ... powers no decent wizard.
.."

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry's desk lamp, and started beating himself around the head with earsplitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, "Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!"

"Quick! In the closet!" hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door, and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

"What - the - devil - are - you - doing?" said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry's. "You've just ruined the punch line of my Japanese golfer joke One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the closet.

"See what it's like here?" he said. "See why I've got to go back to Hogwarts? It's the only place I've got -well, I think I've got friends. "

"Friends who don't even write to Harry Potter?" said Dobby slyly.

"I expect they've just been - wait a minute," said Harry, frowning. "How do you know my friends haven't been writing to me?"

Dobby shuffled his feet.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best -"

"Have you been stopping my letters?"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry's reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione's neat

writing, Ron's untidy scrawl, and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry... Dobby hoped ... if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him ... Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir"

Harry wasn't listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

"Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word

that he will not return to Hogwarts. Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won't go back, sir!"

"No," said Harry angrily. "Give me my friends' letters!"

"Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice," said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open, and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six steps, landing catlike on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, ". . . tell Petunia that very funny story about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason. She's been dying to hear. . . ."

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach disappear.

Aunt Petunia's masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

"No," croaked Harry. "Please ... they'll kill me"

"Harry Potter must say he's not going back to school -"

"Dobby ... please ..."

"Say it, sir -"

"I can't -"

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

"Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter's own good."

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon

burst into the kitchen to find Harry, rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunia's pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over. ("Just our nephew - very disturbed meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs") He shooed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Masons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal - if it hadn't been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just passing around a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs. Mason's head, and swooped out again. Mrs. Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house shouting about lunatics. Mr. Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support, as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, a demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

"Read it!" he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered. "Go on - read it!"

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays! Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to use magic outside school," said Uncle Vernon, a mad gleam dancing in his eyes. "For got to mention it Slipped your mind, I daresay

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. "Well, I've got news for you, boy I'm locking you up You're never going back to that school ... never ... and if you try and magic yourself out - they'll expel you!"

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning,

he paid a man to fit bars on Harry's window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting, and Harry couldn't see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now that the Dursleys knew they weren't going to wake up as fruit bats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he'd probably starve to death anyway.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia's hand appeared, pushing a bowl of canned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

"It's no good turning your beak up at it - that's all we've got," said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn't turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading UNDERAGE WIZARD attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He saw Dobby's face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, "Harry Potter is safe there, sir!" and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

"Stop it," Harry muttered as the rattling pounded in his sore head.
"Leave me alone ... cut it out ... I'm trying to sleep"

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone was goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry's window.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BURROW

Ron!" breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars. "Ron, how did you - What the -?"

Harry's mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked in midair Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron's elder twin brothers.

"All right, Harry?" asked George.

"What's been going on?" said Ron. "Why haven't you been answering my letters? I've asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you'd got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles -"

"It wasn't me - and how did he know?"

"He works for the Ministry," said Ron. "You know we're not supposed to do spells outside school -"

"You should talk," said Harry, staring at the floating car.

"Oh, this doesn't count," said Ron. "We're only borrowing this. It's Dad's, we didn't enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with -"

"I told you, I didn't - but it'll take too long to explain now look, can you tell them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won't let me come back, and obviously I can't magic myself out, because the Ministry'll think that's the second spell I've done in three days, so -"

"Stop gibbering," said Ron. "We've come to take you home with us."

"But you can't magic me out either -"

"We don't need to," said Ron, jerking his head toward the front seat and grinning. "You forget who I've got with me."

"Tie that around the bars," said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

"If the Dursleys wake up, I'm dead," said Harry as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

"Don't worry," said Fred, "and stand back."

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realized how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air. Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys' bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred reversed as close as possible to Harry's window.

"Get in," Ron said.

"But all my Hogwarts stuff - my wand - my broomstick -"

"Where is it?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can't get out of this room -"

"No problem," said George from the front passenger seat. "Out of the way, Harry."

Fred and George climbed catlike through the window into Harry's room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

"A lot of wizards think it's a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick," said Fred, "but we feel they're skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow."

There was a small click and the door swung open.

"So - we'll get your trunk - you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron," whispered George.

"Watch out for the bottom stair - it creaks," Harry whispered back as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry's room to the open window. Fred climbed back into the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

"A bit more," panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car.

"One good push -"

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

"Okay, let's go," George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the windowsill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thunder of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"THAT RUDDY OWL!"

"I've forgotten Hedwig!"

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on - he snatched up Hedwig's cage, dashed to the window, and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then

he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred, and George seized Harry's arms and pulled as hard as they could.

"Petunia!" roared Uncle Vernon. "He's getting away! HE'S GETTING AWAY!"

But the Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry's leg slid out of Uncle Vernon's grasp - Harry was in the car - he'd slammed the door shut

"Put your foot down, Fred!" yelled Ron, and the car shot suddenly toward the moon.

Harry couldn't believe it - he was free. He rolled down the

window, the night air whipping his hair, and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry's window.

"See you next summer!" Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

"Let Hedwig out," he told Ron. "She can fly behind us. She hasn't had a chance to stretch her wings for ages."

George handed the hairpin to Ron and, a moment later, Hedwig soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

"So - what's the story, Harry?" said Ron impatiently. "What's been happening?"

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he'd given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long, shocked silence when he had finished.

"Very fishy," said Fred finally.

"Definitely dodgy" agreed George. "So he wouldn't even tell you who's supposed to be plotting all this stuff?"

"I don't think he could," said Harry. "I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall."

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

"What, you think he was lying to me?" said Harry.

"Well," said Fred, "put it this way - house-elves have got powerful magic of their own, but they can't usually use it without their master's permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you com

ing back to Hogwarts. Someone's idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?"

"Yes," said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry explained. "He hates me."

"Draco Malfoy?" said George, turning around. "Not Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"Must be, it's not a very common name, is it?" said Harry.

Y.

"I've heard Dad talking about him," said George. "He was a big supporter of You-Know-Who."

"And when You-Know-Who disappeared," said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, "Lucius Malfoy came back saying he'd never meant any of it. Load of dung - Dad reckons he was right in You-Know-Who's inner circle."

Harry had heard these rumors about Malfoy's family before, and they didn't surprise him at all. Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look

like a kind, thoughtful, and sensitive boy.

"I don't know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf" said Harry.

"Well, whoever owns him will be an old wizarding family, and they'll be rich," said Fred.

"Yeah, Mum's always wishing we had a house-elf to do the ironing," said George. "But all we've got is a lousy old ghoul in the attic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old manors and castles and places like that; you wouldn't catch one in our house . . ."

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he

could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Sending the family servant to stop Harry from going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

"I'm glad we came to get you, anyway," said Ron. "I was getting really worried when you didn't answer any of my letters. I thought it was Errol's fault at first

."

"Who's Errol?"

"Our owl. He's ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he'd collapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to borrow Hermes -"

"Who?"

"The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made prefect," said Fred from the front.

"But Percy wouldn't lend him to me," said Ron. "Said he needed him."

"Percy's been acting very oddly this summer," said George, frowning. "And he has been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge You're driving too far west, Fred," he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred

twiddled the steering wheel.

"So, does your dad know you've got the car?" said Harry, guessing the answer.

"Er, no," said Ron, "he had to work tonight. Hopefully we'll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it."

"What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?"

"He works in the most boring department," said Ron. "The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

"The what?"

"It's all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an antiques shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home, and tried to serve her friends tea in it. It was a nightmare - Dad was working overtime for weeks."

"What happened?"

"The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in the hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic - it's only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office -and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts of stuff to cover it up -"

"But your dad - this car -"

Fred laughed. "Yeah, Dad's crazy about everything to do with Muggles; our shed's full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it, and puts it back together again. If he raided our house he'd have to put himself under arrest. It drives Mum mad."

"That's the main road," said George, peering down through the windshield. "We'll be there in ten minutes Just as well, it's getting light"

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower, and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

"We're a little way outside the village," said George. "Ottery St. Catchpole."

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

"Touchdown!" said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard, and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron's house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BuRRow. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

"It's not much," said Ron.

"It's wonderful," said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

"Now, we'll go upstairs really quietly," said Fred, "and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. Then, Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, 'Mum, look who turned up in the night!' and she'll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car."

"Right," said Ron. "Come on, Harry, I sleep at the - at the top"

Ron had gone a nasty greenish color, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around.

Mrs. Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a saber-toothed tiger.

"Ah, "said Fred.

"Oh, dear," said George.

Mrs. Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

"So, "she said.

"Morning, Mum," said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

"Have you any idea how worried I've been?" said Mrs. Weasley in a deadly whisper.

"Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to -"

All three of Mrs. Weasley's sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

"Beds empty! No note! Cargone - could have crashed - out of my mind with worry - did you care? - never, as long as I've lived - you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy -"

"Perfect Percy," muttered Fred.

"YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY'S BOOK!" yelled Mrs. Weasley, prodding a finger in Fred's chest. "You could have died, you could have been seen, you could have lost your father his job -"

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs. Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry, who backed away.

"I'm very pleased to see you, Harry, dear," she said. "Come in and have some breakfast."

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous

glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a

scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle, and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like Time to make tea, Time to feed the chickens, and You're late. Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like Charm Your Own Cheese, Enchantment in Baking, and One Minute Feasts - It's Magic! And unless Harry's ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was "Witching Hour, with the popular singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck."

Mrs. Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like "don't know what you were thinking of," and "never would have believed it."

"I don't blame you, dear," she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. "Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we'd come and get you ourselves if you hadn't written back to Ron by Friday. But really," (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate) "flying an illegal car halfway across the country - anyone could have seen you -"

She flicked her wand casually at the dishes in the sink, which began to clean themselves, clinking gently in the background.

"It was cloudy, Mum!" said Fred.

"You keep your mouth closed while you're eating!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"They were starving him, Mum!" said George.

"And you!" said Mrs. Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment there was a diversion in the form of a small, redheaded figure in a long nightdress, who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

"Ginny," said Ron in an undertone to Harry. "My sister. She's been talking about you all summer."

"Yeah, she'll be wanting your autograph, Harry," Fred said with a grin, but he caught his mother's eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

"Blimey, I'm tired," yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last. "I think I'll go to bed and -"

"You will not," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "It's your own fault you've been up all night. You're going to de-gnome the garden for me; they're getting completely out of hand again -"

"Oh, Mum -"

"And you two," she said, glaring at Ron and Fred. "You can go up to bed, dear," she added to Harry. "You didn't ask them to fly that wretched car -"

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, "I'll help Ron. I've never seen a de-gnoming -"

"That's very sweet of you, dear, but it's dull work," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, let's see what Lockhart's got to say on the subject -"

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

"Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden -"

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs. Weasley's book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests. There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who

Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs. Weasley beamed down at him.

"Oh, he is marvelous," she said. "He knows his household pests, all right, it's a wonderful book"

"Mum fancies him," said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Fred," said Mrs. Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. "All right, if you think you know better than Lockhart, you can go and get on with it, and woe betide you if there's a single gnome in that garden when I come out to inspect it."

Yawning and grumbling, the Weasleys slouched outside with Harry behind them. The garden was large, and in Harry's eyes, exactly what a garden should be. The Dursleys wouldn't have liked it - there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting but there were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flower bed, and a big green pond full of frogs.

"Muggles have garden gnomes, too, you know," Harry told Ron they crossed the lawn.

"Yeah, I've seen those things they think are gnomes," said Ron, bent double with his head in a peony bush, "like fat little Santa Clauses with fishing rods"

There was a violent scuffling noise, the peony bush shuddered, and Ron straightened up. "This is a gnome," he said grimly.

"Gerroff me! Gerroff me!" squealed the gnome.

It was certainly nothing like Santa Claus. It was small and leathery looking, with a large, knobby, bald head exactly like a potato. Ron held it at arm's length as it kicked out at him with its horny little feet; he grasped it around the ankles and turned it upside down.

"This is what you have to do," he said. He raised the gnome above his head ("Gerroff me!") and started to swing it in great circles like a lasso. Seeing the shocked look on Harry's face, Ron added, "It doesn't hurt them - you've just got to make them really dizzy so they can't find

their way back to the gnomeholes."

He let go of the gnome's ankles: It flew twenty feet into the air and landed with a thud in the field over the hedge.

"Pitiful," said Fred. "I bet I can get mine beyond that stump."

Harry learned quickly not to feel too sorry for the gnomes. He decided just to drop the first one he caught over the hedge, but the gnome, sensing weakness, sank its razor-sharp teeth into Harry's finger and he had a hard job shaking it off - until

"Wow, Harry - that must've been fifty feet

The air was soon thick with flying gnomes.

"See, they're not too bright," said George, seizing five or six gnomes at once. "The moment they know the de-gnoming's going on they storm up to have a look. You'd think they'd have learned by now just to stay put."

Soon, the crowd of gnomes in the field started walking away in a straggling line, their little shoulders hunched.

"They'll be back," said Ron as they watched the gnomes disappear into the hedge on the other side of the field. "They love it here Dad's too soft with them; he thinks they're funny"

Just then, the front door slammed.

"He's back!" said George. "Dad's home!"

They hurried through the garden and back into the house.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a kitchen chair with his glasses off and his eyes closed. He was a thin man, going bald, but the little hair he had was as red as any of his children's. He was wearing long green robes, which were dusty and travel-worn.

"What a night," he mumbled, groping for the teapot as they all sat down around him. "Nine raids. Nine! And old Mundungus Fletcher tried to put a hex on me when I had my back turned

Mr. Weasley took a long gulp of tea and sighed.

"Find anything, Dad?" said Fred eagerly.

"All I got were a few shrinking door keys and a biting kettle," yawned Mr. Weasley. "There was some pretty nasty stuff that wasn't my department, though. Mortlake was taken away for questioning about some extremely odd ferrets, but that's the Committee on Experimental Charms, thank goodness

"Why would anyone bother making door keys shrink?" said George.

"Just Muggle-baiting," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Sell them a key that keeps shrinking to nothing so they can never find it when they need it Of course, it's very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking - they'll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they'll go to any lengths to ignore magic, even if it's staring them in the face But the things our lot have taken to enchanting, you wouldn't believe -"

"LIKE CARS, FOR INSTANCE?"

Mrs. Weasley had appeared, holding a long poker like a sword. Mr. Weasley's eyes jerked open. He stared guiltily at his wife.

"C-cars, Molly, dear?"

"Yes, Arthur, cars," said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes flashing. "Imagine a wizard buying a rusty old car and telling his wife all he wanted to do with it was take it apart to see how it worked, while really he was enchanting it to make it fly."

Mr. Weasley blinked.

"Well, dear, I think you'll find that he would be quite within the law to do that, even if - er - he maybe would have done better to, um, tell his wife the truth There's a loophole in the law, you'll find As long as he wasn't intending to fly the car, the fact that the car could fly wouldn't -"

"Arthur Weasley, you made sure there was a loophole when you

wrote that law!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Just so you could carry on tinkering with all that Muggle rubbish in your shed! And for your information, Harry arrived this morning in the car you weren't intending to fly!"

"Harry?" said Mr. Weasley blankly. "Harry who?"

He looked around, saw Harry, and jumped.

"Good lord, is it Harry Potter? Very pleased to meet you, Ron's told us so much about -"

"Your sons flew that car to Harry's house and back last night."

shouted Mrs. Weasley. "What have you got to say about that, eh?"

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Did it go all right? I - I mean," he faltered as sparks flew from Mrs. Weasley's eyes, "that - that was very wrong, boys - very wrong indeed

"Let's leave them to it," Ron muttered to Harry as Mrs. Weasley swelled like a bullfrog. "Come on, I'll show you my bedroom."

They slipped out of the kitchen and down a narrow passageway to an uneven staircase, which wound its way, zigzagging up

through the house. On the third landing, a door stood ajar. Harry just caught sight of a pair of bright brown eyes staring at him before it closed with a snap.

"Ginny," said Ron. "You don't know how weird it is for her to be this shy. She never shuts up normally -"

They climbed two more flights until they reached a door with peeling paint and a small plaque on it, saying RONALD'S ROOM.

Harry stepped in, his head almost touching the sloping ceiling, and blinked. It was like walking into a furnace: Nearly everything in Ron's room seemed to be a violent shade of orange: the bedspread, the walls, even the ceiling. Then Harry realized that Ron had covered nearly every inch of the shabby wallpaper with posters of the same seven witches and wizards, all wearing bright orange robes, carrying

broomsticks, and waving energetically.

"Your Quidditch team?" said Harry.

"The Chudley Cannons," said Ron, pointing at the orange bedspread, which was emblazoned with two giant black C's and a speeding cannonball. "Ninth in the league."

Ron's school spellbooks were stacked untidily in a corner, next to a pile of comics that all seemed to feature The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. Ron's magic wand was lying on top of a fish tank full of frog spawn on the windowsill, next to his fat gray rat, Scabbers, who was snoozing in a patch of sun.

Harry stepped over a pack of Self-Shuffling playing cards on the floor and looked out of the tiny window. In the field far below he could see a gang of gnomes sneaking one by one back through the Weasleys' hedge. Then he turned to look at Ron, who was watching him almost nervously, as though waiting for his opinion.

"It's a bit small," said Ron quickly. "Not like that room you had with the Muggles. And I'm right underneath the ghoul in the attic; he's always banging on the pipes and groaning

But Harry, grinning widely, said, "This is the best house I've ever been in."

Ron's ears went pink. .

CHAPTER FOUR

AT FLOURISH AND BLOTTS

Life at the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected. Harry got a shock the first time he looked in the mirror over the kitchen mantelpiece and it shouted, "Tuck your shirt in, scruffy!" The ghoul in the attic howled and dropped pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet, and small explosions from Fred and George's bedroom were considered perfectly normal. What Harry found most unusual about life at Ron's, however, wasn't the talking mirror or the clanking ghoul: It was the fact that everybody there seemed to like him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over the state of his socks and tried to force him to eat fourth helpings at every meal. Mr. Weasley liked Harry to sit next to him at the dinner table so that he could bombard him with questions about life with Muggles, asking him to explain how things like plugs and the postal service worked.

42

"Fascinating." he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. "Ingenious, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic."

Harry heard from Hogwarts one sunny morning about a week after he had arrived at the Burrow. He and Ron went down to breakfast to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already sitting at the kitchen table. The moment she saw Harry, Ginny accidentally knocked her porridge bowl to the floor with a loud clatter. Ginny seemed very prone to knocking things over whenever Harry entered a room. She dived under the table to retrieve the bowl and emerged with her face glowing like the setting sun. Pretending he hadn't noticed this, Harry sat down and took the toast Mrs. Weasley offered him.

"Letters from school," said Mr. Weasley, passing Harry and Ron identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink. "Dumbledore already knows you're here, Harry - doesn't miss a trick, that man. You two've got them, too," he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pajamas.

For a few minutes there was silence as they all read their letters. Harry's told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King's Cross station on September first. There was also a list of the new books he'd need for the coming year.

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2

by Miranda Goshawk

Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart
Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

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Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart
Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart
Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart

Fred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry's.

"You've been told to get all Lockhart's books, too!" he said. "The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan - bet it's a witch."

At this point, Fred caught his mother's eye and quickly busied himself with the marmalade.

"That lot won't come cheap," said George, with a quick look at his parents. "Lockhart's books are really expensive

"Well, we'll manage," said Mrs. Weasley, but she looked worried. "I expect we'll be able to pick up a lot of Ginny's things secondhand."

"Oh, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?" Harry asked Ginny.

She nodded, blushing to the roots of her flaming hair, and put her elbow in the butter dish. Fortunately no one saw this except Harry, because just then Ron's elder brother Percy walked in. He was already dressed, his Hogwarts prefect badge pinned to his sweater vest.

"Morning, all," said Percy briskly. "Lovely day."

He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up again almost immediately, pulling from underneath him a moulting, gray feather duster - at least, that was what Harry thought it was, until he saw that it was breathing.

"Errol!" said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. "Finally - he's got Hermione's answer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys."

He carried Errol to a perch just inside the back door and tried to stand him on it, but Errol flopped straight off again so Ron lay him on the draining board instead, muttering, "Pathetic." Then he ripped open Hermione's letter and read it out loud:

"Dear Ron, and Harry if you're there,

"I hope everything went all right and that Harry is okay and that you didn't do anything illegal to get him out, Ron, because that would get Harry into trouble, too. I've been really worried and if Harry is all right, will you please let me know at once, but perhaps it would be better if you used a different owl because I think another delivery might finish your one off.

"I'm very busy with schoolwork, of course' - How can she be?" said Ron in horror. "We're on vacation! - 'and we're going to London next Wednesday to buy my new books. Why don't we meet in Diagon Alley?"

"Let me know what's happening as soon as you can. Love from Hermione."
"

"Well, that fits in nicely, we can go and get all your things then, too," said Mrs. Weasley, starting to clear the table. "What're you all up to today?"

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were planning to go up the hill to a small paddock the Weasleys owned. It was surrounded by trees that blocked it from view of the village below, meaning that they could practice Quidditch there, as long as they didn't fly too high.

They couldn't use real Quidditch balls, which would have been hard to explain if they had escaped and flown away over the village; instead they threw apples for one another to catch. They took turns riding Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand, which was easily the best broom;

Ron's old Shooting Star was often outstripped by passing butterflies.

Five minutes later they were marching up the hill, broomsticks over their shoulders. They had asked Percy if he wanted to join them, but he had said he was busy. Harry had only seen Percy at mealtimes so far; he stayed shut in his room the rest of the time.

"Wish I knew what he was up to," said Fred, frowning. "He's not himself. His exam results came the day before you did; twelve O.W.L.s and he hardly gloated at all."

"Ordinary Wizarding Levels," George explained, seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Bill got twelve, too. If we're not careful, we'll have another Head Boy in the family. I don't think I could stand the shame."

Bill was the oldest Weasley brother. He and the next brother, Charlie, had already left Hogwarts. Harry had never met either of them, but knew that Charlie was in Romania studying dragons and Bill in Egypt working for the wizard's bank, Gringotts.

"Dunno how Mum and Dad are going to afford all our school stuff this year," said George after a while. "Five sets of Lockhart books! And Ginny needs robes and a wand and everything

Harry said nothing. He felt a bit awkward. Stored in an underground vault at Gringotts in London was a small fortune that his parents had left him. Of course, it was only in the wizarding world that he had money; you couldn't use Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts

46

in Muggle shops. He had never mentioned his Gringotts bank account to the Dursleys; he didn't think their horror of anything connected with magic would stretch to a large pile of gold.

Mrs. Weasley woke them all early the following Wednesday. After a quick half a dozen bacon sandwiches each, they pulled on their coats and Mrs. Weasley took a flowerpot off the kitchen mantelpiece and peered inside.

"We're running low, Arthur," she sighed. "We'll have to buy some more today... Ah well, guests first! After you, Harry dear!"

And she offered him the flowerpot.

Harry stared at them all watching him.

"W-what am I supposed to do?" he stammered.

"He's never traveled by Floo powder," said Ron suddenly. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot."

"Never?" said Mr. Weasley. "But how did you get to Diagon Alley to buy your school things last year?"

"I went on the Underground -"

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Were there escapators? How exactly -"

"Not now, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you've never used it before -"

"He'll be all right, Mum," said Fred. "Harry, watch us first."

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose higher than Fred, who stepped right into it, shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and vanished.

"You must speak clearly, dear," Mrs. Weasley told Harry as George dipped his hand into the flowerpot. "And be sure to get out at the right grate

"The right what?" said Harry nervously as the fire roared and whipped George out of sight, too.

"Well, there are an awful lot of wizard fires to choose from, you know, but as long as you've spoken clearly -"

"He'll be fine, Molly, don't fuss," said Mr. Weasley, helping himself to

Floo powder, too.

"But, dear, if he got lost, how would we ever explain to his aunt and uncle?"

"They wouldn't mind," Harry reassured her. "Dudley would think it was a brilliant joke if I got lost up a chimney, don't worry about that -"

"Well ... all right ... you go after Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, when you get into the fire, say where you're going

"And keep your elbows tucked in," Ron advised.

"And your eyes shut," said Mrs. Weasley. "The soot -"

"Don't fidget," said Ron. "Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace -"

"But don't panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George."

Trying hard to bear all this in mind, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the edge of the fire. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash.

"D-Dia-gon Alley," he coughed.

48

It felt as though he was being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spinning very fast - the roaring in his ears was deafening -he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick - something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning - now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face - squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond - his bacon sandwiches were churning inside him - he closed his eyes again wishing it would stop, and then

He fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt the bridge of his glasses

snap.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet, holding his broken glasses up to his eyes. He was - ,cite alone, but where he was, he had no idea. All he could tell was that he was standing in the stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard's shop - but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the walls, an assortment of human bones lay upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the dark, narrow street Harry could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

The sooner he got out of here, the better. Nose still stinging where it had hit the hearth, Harry made his way swiftly and silently toward the door, but before he'd got halfway toward it, two people appeared on the other side of the glass - and one of them was the

49

very last person Harry wanted to meet when he was lost, covered in soot, and wearing broken glasses: Draco Malfoy.

Harry looked quickly around and spotted a large black cabinet to his left; he shot inside it and pulled the doors closed, leaving a small crack to peer through. Seconds later, a bell clanged, and Malfoy stepped into the shop.

The man who followed could only be Draco's father. He had the same pale, pointed face and identical cold, gray eyes. Mr. Malfoy crossed the shop, looking lazily at the items on display, and rang a bell on the counter before turning to his son and saying, "Touch nothing, Draco."

Malfoy, who had reached for the glass eye, said, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," said his father, drumming his fingers on the counter.

"What's the good of that if I'm not on the House team?" said Malfoy,

looking sulky and bad-tempered. "Harry Potter got a Nimbus Two Thousand last year. Special permission from Dumbledore so he could play for Gryffindor. He's not even that good, it's just because he's famous ... famous for having a stupid scar on his forehead"

Malfoy bent down to examine a shelf full of skulls.

". . . everyone thinks he's so smart, wonderful Potter with his scar and his broomstick -"

"You have told me this at least a dozen times already," said Mr. Malfoy, with a quelling look at his son. "And I would remind you that it is not - prudent - to appear less than fond of Harry Potter, not when most of our kind regard him as the hero who made the Dark Lord disappear - ah, Mr. Borgin."

50

A stooping man had appeared behind the counter, smoothing his greasy hair back from his face.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again," said Mr. Borgin in a voice as oily as his hair. "Delighted - and young Master Malfoy, too - charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced -"

"I'm not buying today, Mr. Borgin, but selling," said Mr. Malfoy.

"Selling?" The smile faded slightly from Mr. Borgin's face.

"You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids," said Mr. Malfoy, taking a roll of parchment from his inside pocket and unraveling it for Mr. Borgin to read. "I have a few - ah - items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call
.....

Mr. Borgin fixed a pair of pince-nez to his nose and looked down the list.

"The Ministry wouldn't presume to trouble you, sir, surely?"

Mr. Malfoy's lip curled.

"I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act - no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it

Harry felt a hot surge of anger.

"- and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it appear -"

"I understand, sir, of course," said Mr. Borgin. "Let me see. . ."

"Can I have that?" interrupted Draco, pointing at the withered hand on its cushion.

51

"Ah, the Hand of Glory!" said Mr. Borgin, abandoning Mr. Malfoy's list and scurrying over to Draco. "Insert a candle and it gives light only to the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir."

"I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or a plunderer, Borgin," said Mr. Malfoy coldly, and Mr. Borgin said quickly, "No offense, sir, no offense meant -"

"Though if his grades don't pick up," said Mr. Malfoy, more coldly still, "that may indeed be all he is fit for -"

"It's not my fault," retorted Draco. "The teachers all have favorites, that Hermione Granger -"

"I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam," snapped Mr. Malfoy.

"Ha!" said Harry under his breath, pleased to see Draco looking both abashed and angry.

"It's the same all over," said Mr. Borgin, in his oily voice. "Wizard blood is counting for less everywhere -"

"Not with me," said Mr. Malfoy, his long nostrils flaring.

"No, sir, nor with me, sir," said Mr. Borgin, with a deep bow.

"In that case, perhaps we can return to my list," said Mr. Malfoy shortly. "I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today -"

They started to haggle. Harry watched nervously as Draco drew nearer and nearer to his hiding place, examining the objects for sale. Draco paused to examine a long coil of hangman's rope and to read, smirking, the card propped on a magnificent necklace of opals, Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed - Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.

Draco turned away and saw the cabinet right in front of him. He walked forward - he stretched out his hand for the handle

"Done," said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. "Come, Draco -"

Harry wiped his forehead on his sleeve as Draco turned away.

"Good day to you, Mr. Borgin. I'll expect you at the manor tomorrow to pick up the goods."

The moment the door had closed, Mr. Borgin dropped his oily manner.

"Good day yourself, Mister Malfoy, and if the stories are true, you haven't sold me half of what's hidden in your manor

Muttering darkly, Mr. Borgin disappeared into a back room. Harry waited for a minute in case he came back, then, quietly as he could, slipped out of the cabinet, past the glass cases, and out of the shop door.

Clutching his broken glasses to his face, Harry stared around. He had emerged into a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts. The one he'd just left, Borgin and Burkes, looked like the largest, but opposite was a nasty window display of shrunken heads and, two doors down, a large cage was alive with gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wizards were

watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight and hoping against hope he'd be able to find a way out of here.

An old wooden street sign hanging over a shop selling poisonous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn't help, as Harry had never heard of such a place. He supposed he hadn't spoken clearly enough through his mouthful of ashes

back in the Weasleys' fire. Trying to stay calm, he wondered what to do.

"Not lost are you, my dear?" said a voice in his ear, making him jump.

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said. "I'm just -"

"HARRY! What d'yeh think yer doin' down there?"

Harry's heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cascaded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding toward them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard.

"Hagrid!" Harry croaked in relief. "I was lost - Floo powder -"

Hagrid seized Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from the witch, knocking the tray right out of her hands. Her shrieks followed them all the way along the twisting alleyway out into bright sunlight. Harry saw a familiar, snow-white marble building in the distance - Gringotts Bank. Hagrid had steered him right into Diagon Alley.

"Yer a mess!" said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung outside an apothecary. "Skulkin' around Knockturn Alley, I dunno dodgy place, Harry - don' want no one ter see yeh down there -"

"I realized that," said Harry, ducking as Hagrid made to brush him off again. "I told you, I was lost - what were you doing down there, anyway?"

"I was lookin' fer a Flesh-Eatin' Slug Repellent," growled Hagrid. "They're ruinin' the school cabbages. Yer not on yer own?"

"I'm staying with the Weasleys but we got separated," Harry explained. "I've got to go and find them"

They set off together down the street.

"How come yeh never wrote back ter me?" said Hagrid as Harry jogged alongside him (he had to take three steps to every stride of Hagrid's enormous boots). Harry explained all about Dobby and the Dursleys.

"Lousy Muggles," growled Hagrid. "If I'd've known -"

"Harry! Harry! Over here!"

Harry looked up and saw Hermione Granger standing at the top of the white flight of steps to Gringotts. She ran down to meet them, her bushy brown hair flying behind her.

"What happened to your glasses? Hello, Hagrid - Oh, it's wonderful to see you two again - Are you coming into Gringotts, Harry?"

"As soon as I've found the Weasleys," said Harry.

"Yeh won't have long ter wait," Hagrid said with a grin.

Harry and Hermione looked around: Sprinting up the crowded street were Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley panted. "We hoped you'd only gone one

grate too far He mopped his glistening bald patch. "Molly's

frantic - she's coming now -"

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked.

"Knockturn Alley," said Hagrid grimly.

"Excellent." said Fred and George together.

"We've never been allowed in," said Ron enviously.

"I should ruddy well think not," growled Hagrid.

Mrs. Weasley now came galloping into view, her handbag swinging wildly in one hand, Ginny just clinging onto the other.

"Oh, Harry - oh, my dear - you could have been any where -"

Gasping for breath she pulled a large clothes brush out of her bag and began sweeping off the soot Hagrid hadn't managed to beat away. Mr. Weasley took Harry's glasses, gave them a tap of his wand, and returned them, good as new.

"Well, gotta be off," said Hagrid, who was having his hand wrung by Mrs. Weasley ("Knockturn Alley! If you hadn't found him, Hagrid!"). "See yer at Hogwarts!" And he strode away, head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the packed street.

"Guess who I saw in Borgin and Burkes?" Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they climbed the Gringotts steps. "Malfoy and his father."

"Did Lucius Malfoy buy anything?" said Mr. Weasley sharply behind them.

"No, he was selling ="

"So he's worried," said Mr. Weasley with grim satisfaction. "Oh, I'd love to get Lucius Malfoy for something

"You be careful, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley sharply as they were bowed into the bank by a goblin at the door. "That family's trouble. Don't go biting off more than you can chew -"

"So you don't think I'm a match for Lucius Malfoy?" said Mr. Weasley indignantly, but he was distracted almost at once by the sight of Hermione's parents, who were standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them.

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"But you're Muggles!" said Mr. Weasley delightedly. "We must have a drink! What's that you've got there? Oh, you're changing Muggle money. Molly, look!" He pointed excitedly at the tenpound notes in Mr. Granger's hand.

"Meet you back here," Ron said to Hermione as the Weasleys and Harry were led off to their underground vaults by another Gringotts goblin.

The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along miniature train tracks through the bank's underground tunnels. Harry enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys' vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in Knockturn Alley, when it was opened. There was a very small pile of silver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon. Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag. Harry felt even worse when they reached his vault. He tried to block the contents from view as he hastily shoved handfuls of coins into a leather bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy muttered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were going to a secondhand robe shop. Mr. Weasley was insisting on taking the Grangers off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink.

"We'll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour to buy your schoolbooks," said Mrs. Weasley, setting off with Ginny. "And not one step down Knockturn Alley!" she shouted at the twins' retreating backs.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione strolled off along the winding, cobbled street. The bag of gold, silver, and bronze jangling cheerfully

in Harry's pocket was clamoring to be spent, so he bought three large strawberry-and-peanut-butter ice creams, which they slurped happily as they wandered up the alley, examining the fascinating shop windows. Ron gazed longingly at a full set of Chudley Cannon robes in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies until Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door. In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous

Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called Prefects Who Gained Power.

"A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers," Ron read aloud off the back cover. "That sounds fascinating"

"Go away," Percy snapped.

"Course, he's very ambitious, Percy, he's got it all planned out He wants to be Minister of Magic. . . ." Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed

by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his autobiography

MAGICAL ME

today 12:30 P.m. to 4:30 P.m.

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Mrs. Weasley's age. A harrassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying, "Calmly, please, ladies Don't push, there ... mind the books, now"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. They each grabbed a copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly

white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with every blinding flash.

"Out of the way, there," he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. "This is for the Daily Prophet -"

"Big deal," said Ron, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Gilderoy Lockhart heard him. He looked up. He saw Ron

and then he saw Harry. He stared. Then he leapt to his feet and positively shouted, "It can't be Harry Potter?"

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived forward, seized Harry's arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry's face burned as Lockhart shook his hand for the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the Weasleys.

"Nice big smile, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

When he finally let go of Harry's hand, Harry could hardly feel his fingers. He tried to sidle back over to the Weasleys, but Lockhart threw an arm around his shoulders and clamped him tightly to his side.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said loudly, waving for quiet. "What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time!

"When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography -which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge-" The crowd applauded again. "He had no idea," Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to

the end of his nose, "that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me*. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The crowd cheered and clapped and Harry found himself being

60

presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Staggering slightly under their weight, he managed to make his way out of the limelight to the edge of the room, where Ginny was standing next to her new cauldron.

"You have these," Harry mumbled to her, tipping the books into the cauldron. "I'll buy my own -"

"Bet you loved that, didn't you, Potter?" said a voice Harry had no trouble recognizing. He straightened up and found himself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy, who was wearing his usual sneer.

"Famous Harry Potter," said Malfoy. "Can't even go into a bookshop without making the front page."

"Leave him alone, he didn't want all that!" said Ginny. It was the first time she had spoken in front of Harry. She was glaring at Malfoy.

"Potter, you've got yourself a girlfriend!" drawled Malfoy. Ginny went scarlet as Ron and Hermione fought their way over, both clutching stacks of Lockhart's books.

"Oh, it's you," said Ron, looking at Malfoy as if he were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. "Bet you're surprised to see Harry here, eh?"

"Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley," retorted Malfoy. "I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for all those."

Ron went as red as Ginny. He dropped his books into the cauldron,

too, and started toward Malfoy, but Harry and Hermione grabbed the back of his jacket.

"Ron!" said Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Fred and George.
"What are you doing? It's too crowded in here, let's go outside."

61

"Well, well, well - Arthur Weasley."

It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco's shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

"Lucius," said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear," said Mr. Malfoy. "All those raids ... I hope they're paying you overtime?"

He reached into Ginny's cauldron and extracted, from amid the glossy Lockhart books, a very old, very battered copy of A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration.

"Obviously not," Mr. Malfoy said. "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley flushed darker than either Ron or Ginny.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy," he said.

"Clearly," said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who were watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley ... and I thought your family could sink no lower ="

There was a thud of metal as Ginny's cauldron went flying; Mr. Weasley had thrown himself at Mr. Malfoy, knocking him backward into a bookshelf. Dozens of heavy spellbooks came thundering down on all their heads; there was a yell of, "Get him, Dad!" from Fred or George; Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, "No, Arthur, no!"; the crowd stampeded backward, knocking more shelves over; "Gentlemen, please - please!" cried the assistant, and then, louder than all

"Break it up, there, gents, break it up -"

62

Hagrid was wading toward them through the sea of books. In an instant he had pulled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy apart. Mr. Weasley had a cut lip and Mr. Malfoy had been hit in the eye by an Encyclopedia of Toadstools. He was still holding Ginny's old Transfiguration book. He thrust it at her, his eyes glittering with malice.

"Here, girl - take your book - it's the best your father can give you -" Pulling himself out of Hagrid's grip he beckoned to Draco and swept from the shop.

"Yeh should've ignored him, Arthur," said Hagrid, almost lifting Mr. Weasley off his feet as he straightened his robes. "Rotten ter the core, the whole family, everyone knows that - no Malfoy's worth listenin' ter - bad blood, that's what it is - come on now - let's get outta here."

The assistant looked as though he wanted to stop them leaving, but he barely came up to Hagrid's waist and seemed to think better of it. They hurried up the street, the Grangers shaking with fright and Mrs. Weasley beside herself with fury.

"A fine example to set for your children . . . brawling in public . . . what Gilderoy Lockhart must've thought -"

"He was pleased," said Fred. "Didn't you hear him as we were leaving? He was asking that bloke from the Daily Prophet if he'd be able to work the fight into his report - said it was all publicity -"

But it was a subdued group that headed back to the fireside in the Leaky Cauldron, where Harry, the Weasleys, and all their shopping would be traveling back to the Burrow using Floo powder. They said good-bye to the Grangers, who were leaving the pub for the Muggle street on the other side; Mr. Weasley started to ask

63

them how bus stops worked, but stopped quickly at the look on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry took off his glasses and put them safely in his pocket before

helping himself to Floo powder. It definitely wasn't his favorite way to travel.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WHOMPING WILLOW

The end of the summer vacation came too quickly for Harry's liking. He was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts, but his month at the Burrow had been the happiest of his life. It was difficult not to feel jealous of Ron when he thought of the Dursleys and the sort of welcome he could expect next time he turned up on Privet Drive.

On their last evening, Mrs. Weasley conjured up a sumptuous dinner that included all of Harry's favorite things, ending with a mouthwatering treacle pudding. Fred and George rounded off the evening with a display of Filibuster fireworks; they filled the kitchen with red and blue stars that bounced from ceiling to wall for at least half an hour. Then it was time for a last mug of hot chocolate and bed.

It took a long while to get started next morning. They were up at dawn, but somehow they still seemed to have a great deal to do.

65

Mrs. Weasley dashed about in a bad mood looking for spare socks and quills; people kept colliding on the stairs, half-dressed with bits of toast in their hands; and Mr. Weasley nearly broke his neck, tripping over a stray chicken as he crossed the yard carrying Ginny's trunk to the car.

Harry couldn't see how eight people, six large trunks, two owls, and a rat were going to fit into one small Ford Anglia. He had reckoned, of course, without the special features that Mr. Weasley had added.

"Not a word to Molly," he whispered to Harry as he opened the trunk and showed him how it had been magically expanded so that the luggage fitted easily.

When at last they were all in the car, Mrs. Weasley glanced into the back seat, where Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Percy were all sitting comfortably side by side, and said, "Muggles do know more than we give them credit for, don't they?" She and Ginny got into the front seat, which had been stretched so that it resembled a park bench. "I mean, you'd never know it was this roomy from the outside, would you?"

Mr. Weasley started up the engine and they trundled out of the yard, Harry turning back for a last look at the house. He barely had time to wonder when he'd see it again when they were back George had forgotten his box of Filibuster fireworks. Five minutes after that, they skidded to a halt in the yard so that Fred could run in for his broomstick. They had almost reached the highway when Ginny shrieked that she'd left her diary. By the time she had clambered back into the car, they were running very late, and tempers were running high.

Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch and then at his wife.

"Molly, dear -"

"No, Arthur -"

"No one would see - this little button here is an Invisibility Booster I installed - that'd get us up in the air - then we fly above the clouds. We'd be there in ten minutes and no one would be any the wiser -"

"I said no, Arthur, not in broad daylight -"

They reached King's Cross at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Weasley dashed across the road to get trolleys for their trunks and they all hurried into the station.

Harry had caught the Hogwarts Express the previous year. The tricky part was getting onto platform nine and three-quarters, which wasn't visible to the Muggle eye. What you had to do was walk through the solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. It didn't hurt, but it had to be done carefully so that none of the Muggles noticed you vanishing.

"Percy first," said Mrs. Weasley, looking nervously at the clock

overhead, which showed they had only five minutes to disappear casually through the barrier.

Percy strode briskly forward and vanished. Mr. Weasley went next; Fred and George followed.

"I'll take Ginny and you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Harry and Ron, grabbing Ginny's hand and setting off. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

"Let's go together, we've only got a minute," Ron said to Harry.

Harry made sure that Hedwig's cage was safely wedged on top of his trunk and wheeled his trolley around to face the barrier. He felt

61

perfectly confident; this wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo powder. Both of them bent low over the handles of their trolleys and walked purposefully toward the barrier, gathering speed. A few feet away from it, they broke into a run and

CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the barrier and bounced backward; Ron's trunk fell off with a loud thump, Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig's cage bounced onto the shiny floor, and she rolled away, shrieking indignantly; people all around them stared and a guard nearby yelled, "What in blazes d'you think you're doing?"

"Lost control of the trolley," Harry gasped, clutching his ribs as he got up. Ron ran to pick up Hedwig, who was causing such a scene that there was a lot of muttering about cruelty to animals from the surrounding crowd.

"Why can't we get through?" Harry hissed to Ron.

"I dunno -"

Ron looked wildly around. A dozen curious people were still watching them.

"We're going to miss the train," Ron whispered. "I don't understand why the gateway's sealed itself -"

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ten seconds ... nine seconds ...

He wheeled his trolley forward cautiously until it was right against the barrier and pushed with all his might. The metal remained solid.

Three seconds . . . two seconds ... one second ...

"It's gone," said Ron, sounding stunned. "The train's left. What if Mum and Dad can't get back through to us? Have you got any Muggle money?"

68

And they marched off through the crowd of curious Muggles, out of the station and back onto the side road where the old Ford Anglia was parked.

Ron unlocked the cavernous trunk with a series of taps from his wand. They heaved their luggage back in, put Hedwig on the back seat, and got into the front.

"Check that no one's watching," said Ron, starting the ignition with another tap of his wand. Harry stuck his head out of the window: Traffic was rumbling along the main road ahead, but their street was empty.

"Okay," he said.

Ron pressed a tiny silver button on the dashboard. The car around them vanished - and so did they. Harry could feel the seat vibrating beneath him, hear the engine, feel his hands on his knees and his glasses on his nose, but for all he could see, he had become a pair of eyeballs, floating a few feet above the ground in a dingy street full of parked cars.

"Let's go," said Ron's voice from his right.

And the ground and the dirty buildings on either side fell away,

dropping out of sight as the car rose; in seconds, the whole of London lay, smoky and glittering, below them.

Then there was a popping noise and the car, Harry, and Ron reappeared.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster. "It's faulty -"

Both of them pummeled it. The car vanished. Then it flickered back again.

"Hold on!" Ron yelled, and he slammed his foot on the acceler

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ator; they shot straight into the low, woolly clouds and everything turned dull and foggy.

"Now what?" said Harry, blinking at the solid mass of cloud pressing in on them from all sides.

"We need to see the train to know what direction to go in," said Ron.

"Dip back down again - quickly -"

They dropped back beneath the clouds and twisted around in their seats, squinting at the ground.

"I can see it!" Harry yelled. "Right ahead - there!"

The Hogwarts Express was streaking along below them like a scarlet snake.

"Due north," said Ron, checking the compass on the dashboard.

"Okay, we'll just have to check on it every half hour or so - hold on

And they shot up through the clouds. A minute later, they burst out into a blaze of sunlight.

It was a different world. The wheels of the car skimmed the sea of fluffy cloud, the sky a bright, endless blue under the blinding white sun.

"All we've got to worry about now are airplanes," said Ron.

They looked at each other and started to laugh; for a long time, they couldn't stop.

It was as though they had been plunged into a fabulous dream. This, thought Harry, was surely the only way to travel - past swirls and turrets of snowy cloud, in a car full of hot, bright sunlight, with a fat pack of toffees in the glove compartment, and the prospect of seeing Fred's and George's jealous faces when they

* 71

landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle.

They made regular checks on the train as they flew farther and farther north, each dip beneath the clouds showing them a different view. London was soon far behind them, replaced by neat green fields that gave way in turn to wide, purplish moors, a great city alive with cars like multicolored ants, villages with tiny toy churches.

Several uneventful hours later, however, Harry had to admit that some of the fun was wearing off. The toffees had made them extremely thirsty and they had nothing to drink. He and Ron had pulled off their sweaters, but Harry's T-shirt was sticking to the back of his seat and his glasses kept sliding down to the end of his sweaty nose. He had stopped noticing the fantastic cloud shapes now and was thinking longingly of the train miles below, where you could buy ice-cold pumpkin juice from a trolley pushed by a plump witch. Why hadn't they been able to get onto platform nine and three-quarters?

"Can't be much further, can it?" croaked Ron, hours later still, as the sun started to sink into their floor of cloud, staining it a deep pink. "Ready for another check on the train?"

It was still right below them, winding its way past a snowcapped mountain. It was much darker beneath the canopy of clouds.

Ron put his foot on the accelerator and drove them upward again, but as he did so, the engine began to whine.

Harry and Ron exchanged nervous glances.

"It's probably just tired," said Ron. "It's never been this far before

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12

And they both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker. Stars were blossoming in the blackness. Harry pulled his sweater back on, trying to ignore the way the windshield wipers were now waving feebly, as though in protest.

"Not far," said Ron, more to the car than to Harry, "not far now," and he patted the dashboard nervously.

When they flew back beneath the clouds a little while later, they had to squint through the darkness for a landmark they knew.

"There!" Harry shouted, making Ron and Hedwig jump.

"Straight ahead!"

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

But the car had begun to shudder and was losing speed.

"Come on," Ron said cajolingly, giving the steering wheel a little shake, "nearly there, come on -"

The engine groaned. Narrow jets of steam were issuing from under the hood. Harry found himself gripping the edges of his seat very hard as they flew toward the lake.

The car gave a nasty wobble. Glancing out of his window, Harry saw the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water, a mile below. Ron's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The car wobbled again.

"Come on," Ron muttered.

They were over the lake - the castle was right ahead - Ron put his foot down.

There was a loud clunk, a splutter, and the engine died completely.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, into the silence.

The nose of the car dropped. They were falling, gathering speed, heading straight for the solid castle wall.

"Noooooo!" Ron yelled, swinging the steering wheel around; they

missed the dark stone wall by inches as the car turned in a great arc, soaring over the dark greenhouses, then the vegetable patch, and then out over the black lawns, losing altitude all the time.

Ron let go of the steering wheel completely and pulled his wand out of his back pocket

"STOP! STOP!" he yelled, whacking the dashboard and the windshield, but they were still plummeting, the ground flying up toward them

"WATCH OUT FOR THAT TREE!" Harry bellowed, lunging for the steering wheel, but too late

CRUNCH.

With an earsplitting bang of metal on wood, they hit the thick tree trunk and dropped to the ground with a heavy jolt. Steam was billowing from under the crumpled hood; Hedwig was shrieking in terror; a golfball-size lump was throbbing on Harry's head where he had hit the windshield; and to his right, Ron let out a low, despairing groan.

"Are you okay?" Harry said urgently.

"My wand," said Ron, in a shaky voice. "Look at my wand -"

It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters.

Harry opened his mouth to say he was sure they'd be able to mend it up at the school, but he never even got started. At that very moment, something hit his side of the car with the force of a

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charging bull, sending him lurching sideways into Ron, just as an equally heavy blow hit the roof.

"What's happen -?"

Ron gasped, staring through the windshield, and Harry looked around

just in time to see a branch as thick as a python smash into it. The tree they had hit was attacking them. Its trunk was bent almost double, and its gnarled boughs were pummeling every inch of the car it could reach.

"Aaargh!" said Ron as another twisted limb punched a large dent into his door; the windshield was now trembling under a hail of blows from knuckle-like twigs and a branch as thick as a battering ram was pounding furiously on the roof, which seemed to be caving

"Run for it!" Ron shouted, throwing his full weight against his door, but next second he had been knocked backward into Harry's lap by a vicious uppercut from another branch.

"We're done for!" he moaned as the ceiling sagged, but suddenly the floor of the car was vibrating - the engine had restarted.

"Reverse!" Harry yelled, and the car shot backward; the tree was still trying to hit them; they could hear its roots creaking as it almost ripped itself up, lashing out at them as they sped out of reach.

"That," panted Ron, "was close. Well done, car -"

The car, however, had reached the end of its tether. With two sharp clunks, the doors flew open and Harry felt his seat tip sideways: Next thing he knew he was sprawled on the damp ground. Loud thuds told him that the car was ejecting their luggage from the trunk; Hedwig's cage flew through the air and burst open; she rose out of it with an angry screech and sped off toward the castle

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without a backward look. Then, dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

"Come back!" Ron yelled after it, brandishing his broken wand.

"Dad'll kill me!"

But the car disappeared from view with one last snort from its exhaust.

"Can you believe our luck?" said Ron miserably, bending down to

pick up Scabbers. "Of all the trees we could've hit, we had to get one that hits back."

He glanced over his shoulder at the ancient tree, which was still flailing its branches threateningly.

"Come on," said Harry wearily, "we'd better get up to the school

It wasn't at all the triumphant arrival they had pictured. Stiff, cold, and bruised, they seized the ends of their trunks and began dragging them up the grassy slope, toward the great oak front doors.

"I think the feast's already started," said Ron, dropping his trunk at the foot of the front steps and crossing quietly to look through a brightly lit window. "Hey - Harry - come and look - it's the Sorting!"

Harry hurried over and, together, he and Ron peered in at the Great Hall.

Innumerable candles were hovering in midair over four long, crowded tables, making the golden plates and goblets sparkle. Overhead, the bewitched ceiling, which always mirrored the sky outside, sparkled with stars.

Through the forest of pointed black Hogwarts hats, Harry saw a long line of scared-looking first years filing into the Hall. Ginny

* 76

was among them, easily visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall, a bespectacled witch with her hair in a tight bun, was placing the famous Hogwarts Sorting Hat on a stool before the newcomers.

Every year, this aged old hat, patched, frayed, and dirty, sorted new students into the four Hogwarts houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin). Harry well remembered putting it on, exactly one year ago, and waiting, petrified, for its decision as it muttered aloud in his ear. For a few horrible seconds he had feared that the hat was going to put him in Slytherin, the house that had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other -but he had

ended up in Gryffindor, along with Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys. Last term, Harry and Ron had helped Gryffindor win the House Championship, beating Slytherin for the first time in seven years.

A very small, mousy-haired boy had been called forward to place the hat on his head. Harry's eyes wandered past him to where Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, sat watching the Sorting from the staff table, his long silver beard and half-moon glasses shining brightly in the candlelight. Several seats along, Harry saw Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed in robes of aquamarine. And there at the end was Hagrid, huge and hairy, drinking deeply from his goblet.

"Hang on. . ." Harry muttered to Ron. "There's an empty chair at the staff table Where's Snape?"

Professor Severus Snape was Harry's least favorite teacher. Harry also happened to be Snape's least favorite student. Cruel, sarcastic, and disliked by everybody except the students from his own house (Slytherin), Snape taught Potions.

"Maybe he's ill!" said Ron hopefully.

"Maybe he's left," said Harry, "because he missed out on the Defense Against Dark Arts job again!"

"Or he might have been sacked!" said Ron enthusiastically. "I mean, everyone hates him -"

"Or maybe," said a very cold voice right behind them, "he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive on the school train."

Harry spun around. There, his black robes rippling in a cold breeze, stood Severus Snape. He was a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy, shoulder-length black hair, and at this moment, he was smiling in a way that told Harry he and Ron were in very deep trouble.

"Follow me," said Snape.

Not daring even to look at each other, Harry and Ron followed Snape up the steps into the vast, echoing entrance hall, which was lit with

flaming torches. A delicious smell of food was wafting from the Great Hall, but Snape led them away from the warmth and light, down a narrow stone staircase that led into the dungeons.

"In!" he said, opening a door halfway down the cold passageway and pointing.

They entered Snape's office, shivering. The shadowy walls were lined with shelves of large glass jars, in which floated all manner of revolting things Harry didn't really want to know the name of at the moment. The fireplace was dark and empty. Snape closed the door and turned to look at them.

"So," he said softly, "the train isn't good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a bang, did we, boys?"

"No, sir, it was the barrier at King's Cross, it -"

78

"Silence!" said Snape coldly. "What have you done with the car?"

Ron gulped. This wasn't the first time Snape had given Harry the impression of being able to read minds. But a moment later, he understood, as Snape unrolled today's issue of the Evening Prophet. "You were seen," he hissed, showing them the headline: FLYING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES. He began to read aloud: "Two Muggles in London, convinced they saw an old car flying over the Post Office tower ... at noon in Norfolk, Mrs. Hetty Bayliss, while hanging out her washing ... Mr. Angus Fleet, of Peebles, reported to police ... Six or seven Muggles in all. I believe your father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office?" he said, looking up at Ron and smiling still more nastily. "Dear, dear ... his own son. . ."

Harry felt as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach by one of the mad tree's larger branches. If anyone found out Mr. Weasley had bewitched the car ... he hadn't thought of that "I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow," Snape went on.

"That tree did more damage to us than we -" Ron blurted out.

"Silence!" snapped Snape again. "Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who do have that happy power. You will wait here."

Harry and Ron stared at each other, white-faced. Harry didn't feel hungry any more. He now felt extremely sick. He tried not to look at a large, slimy something suspended in green liquid on a

shelf behind Snape's desk. If Snape had gone to fetch Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, they were hardly any better off. She might be fairer than Snape, but she was still extremely strict.

Ten minutes later, Snape returned, and sure enough it was Professor McGonagall who accompanied him. Harry had seen Professor McGonagall angry on several occasions, but either he had forgotten just how thin her mouth could go, or he had never seen her this angry before. She raised her wand the moment she entered; Harry and Ron both flinched, but she merely pointed it at the empty fireplace, where flames suddenly erupted.

"Sit," she said, and they both backed into chairs by the fire.

"Explain," she said, her glasses glinting ominously.

Ron launched into the story, starting with the barrier at the station refusing to let them through.

"

-so we had no choice, Professor, we couldn't get on the train."

"Why didn't you send us a letter by owl? I believe you have an owl?" Professor McGonagall said coldly to Harry.

Harry gaped at her. Now she said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"I - I didn't think -"

"That," said Professor McGonagall, "is obvious."

There was a knock on the office door and Snape, now looking happier

than ever, opened it. There stood the headmaster, Professor Dumbledore.

Harry's whole body went numb. Dumbledore was looking unusually grave. He stared down his very crooked nose at them, and

80

Harry suddenly found himself wishing he and Ron were still being beaten up by the Whomping Willow.

There was a long silence. Then Dumbledore said, "Please explain why you did this."

It would have been better if he had shouted. Harry hated the disappointment in his voice. For some reason, he was unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, and spoke instead to his knees. He told Dumbledore everything except that Mr. Weasley owned the bewitched car, making it sound as though he and Ron had happened to find a flying car parked outside the station. He knew Dumbledore would see through this at once, but Dumbledore asked no questions about the car. When Harry had finished, he merely continued to peer at them through his spectacles.

"We'll go and get our stuff," said Ron in a hopeless sort of voice.

"What are you talking about, Weasley?" barked Professor McGonagall.

"Well, you're expelling us, aren't you?" said Ron.

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore.

"Not today, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore. "But I must impress upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you."

Snape looked as though Christmas had been canceled. He cleared his throat and said, "Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree - surely acts of this nature -"

"It will be for Professor McGonagall to decide on these boys' punishments, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "They are in her House and are therefore her responsibility." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "I must go back to the feast, Minerva, I've got to give out a few notices. Come, Severus, there's a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample -"

Snape shot a look of pure venom at Harry and Ron as he allowed himself to be swept out of his office, leaving them alone with Professor McGonagall, who was still eyeing them like a wrathful eagle. "You'd better get along to the hospital wing, Weasley, you're bleeding."

"Not much," said Ron, hastily wiping the cut over his eye with his sleeve. "Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted -"

"The Sorting Ceremony is over," said Professor McGonagall.

"Your sister is also in Gryffindor."

"Oh, good," said Ron.

"And speaking of Gryffindor -" Professor McGonagall said sharply, but Harry cut in: "Professor, when we took the car, term hadn't started, so - so Gryffindor shouldn't really have points taken from it - should it?" he finished, watching her anxiously.

Professor McGonagall gave him a piercing look, but he was sure she had almost smiled. Her mouth looked less thin, anyway.

"I will not take any points from Gryffindor," she said, and Harry's heart lightened considerably. "But you will both get a detention."

It was better than Harry had expected. As for Dumbledore's writing to the Dursleys, that was nothing. Harry knew perfectly well they'd just be disappointed that the Whomping Willow hadn't squashed him flat.

82

Professor McGonagall raised her wand again and pointed it at Snape's desk. A large plate of sandwiches, two silver goblets, and a jug of iced pumpkin juice appeared with a pop.

"You will eat in here and then go straight up to your dormitory," she said. "I must also return to the feast."

When the door had closed behind her, Ron let out a long, low whistle.

"I thought we'd had it," he said, grabbing a sandwich.

"So did I," said Harry, taking one, too.

"Can you believe our luck, though?" said Ron thickly through a mouthful of chicken and ham. "Fred and George must've flown that car five or six times and no Muggle ever saw them." He swallowed and took another huge bite. "Why couldn't we get through the barrier?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll have to watch our step from now on, though," he said, taking a grateful swig of pumpkin juice. "Wish we could've gone up to the feast

"She didn't want us showing off," said Ron sagely. "Doesn't want people to think it's clever, arriving by flying car."

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could (the plate kept refilling itself) they rose and left the office, treading the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. The castle was quiet; it seemed that the feast was over. They walked past muttering portraits and creaking suits of armor, and climbed narrow flights of stone stairs, until at last they reached the passage where the secret entrance to Gryffindor Tower was hidden, behind an oil painting of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Er -" said Harry.

They didn't know the new year's password, not having met a Gryffindor prefect yet, but help came almost immediately; they heard hurrying feet behind them and turned to see Hermione dashing toward them.

"There you are! Where have you been? The most ridiculous rumors - someone said you'd been expelled for crashing a flying car

"Well, we haven't been expelled," Harry assured her.

"You're not telling me you did fly here?" said Hermione, sounding

almost as severe as Professor McGonagall.

"Skip the lecture," said Ron impatiently, "and tell us the new password."

"It's `wattlebird,'" said Hermione impatiently, "but that's not the point -"

Her words were cut short, however, as the portrait of the fat lady swung open and there was a sudden storm of clapping. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor House was still awake, packed into the circular common room, standing on the lopsided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive. Arms reached through the portrait hole to pull Harry and Ron inside, leaving Hermione to scramble in after them.

"Brilliant!" yelled Lee Jordan. "Inspired! What an entrance! Flying a car right into the Whomping Willow, people'll be talking about that one for years -"

"Good for you," said a fifth year Harry had never spoken to; someone was patting him on the back as though he'd just won a marathon; Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and said together, "Why couldn't we've come in the car, eh?"

84

Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly, but Harry could see one person who didn't look happy at all. Percy was visible over the heads of some excited first years, and he seemed to be trying to get near enough to start telling them off. Harry nudged Ron in the ribs and nodded in Percy's direction. Ron got the point at once.

"Got to get upstairs - bit tired," he said, and the two of them started pushing their way toward the door on the other side of the room, which led to a spiral staircase and the dormitories.

"Night," Harry called back to Hermione, who was wearing a scowl just like Percy's.

They managed to get to the other side of the common room, still having their backs slapped, and gained the peace of the staircase.

They hurried up it, right to the top, and at last reached the door of their old dormitory, which now had a sign on it saying SECOND YEARS. They entered the familiar, circular room, with its five four-posters hung with red velvet and its high, narrow windows. Their trunks had been brought up for them and stood at the ends of their beds.

Ron grinned guiltily at Harry.

"I know I shouldn't've enjoyed that or anything, but ='

The dormitory door flew open and in came the other second year Gryffindor boys, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom.

"Unbelievable!" beamed Seamus.

"Cool," said Dean.

"Amazing," said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn't help it. He grinned, too.

* 85 *

CHAPTER SIX

GILDEROY LOCKHART

he next day, however, Harry barely grinned once. Things started to go downhill from breakfast in the Great Hall. The four long house tables were laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon, beneath the enchanted ceiling (today, a dull, cloudy gray). Harry and Ron sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who had her copy of *Voyages with Vampires* propped open against a milk jug. There was a slight stiffness in the way she said "Morning," which told Harry that she was still disapproving of the way they had arrived. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, greeted them cheerfully. Neville was a round-faced and accident-prone boy with the worst memory of anyone Harry had ever met.

"Mail's due any minute - I think Gran's sending a few things I forgot."

Harry had only just started his porridge when, sure enough, there was a rushing sound overhead and a hundred or so owls

86

streamed in, circling the hall and dropping letters and packages into the chattering crowd. A big, lumpy package bounced off Neville's head and, a second later, something large and gray fell into Hermione's jug, spraying them all with milk and feathers.

"Enrol!" said Ron, pulling the bedraggled owl out by the feet. Errol slumped, unconscious, onto the table, his legs in the air and a damp red envelope in his beak.

"Oh, no -" Ron gasped.

"It's all right, he's still alive," said Hermione, prodding Errol gently with the tip of her finger.

"It's not that - it's that."

Ron was pointing at the red envelope. It looked quite ordinary to Harry, but Ron and Neville were both looking at it as though they expected it to explode.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"She's - she's sent me a Howler," said Ron faintly.

"You'd better open it, Ron," said Neville in a timid whisper. "It'll be worse if you don't. My gran sent me one once, and I ignored it and" - he gulped - "it was horrible."

Harry looked from their petrified faces to the red envelope.

"What's a Howler?" he said.

But Ron's whole attention was fixed on the letter, which had begun to smoke at the corners.

"Open it," Neville urged. "It'll all be over in a few minutes -"

Ron stretched out a shaking hand, eased the envelope from Errol's beak, and slit it open. Neville stuffed his fingers in his ears. A split second later, Harry knew why. He thought for a moment it had exploded; a roar of sound filled the huge hall, shaking dust from the ceiling.

8 _

"- E CAR, I WO ULDN'T HAVE BEEN S UR-

STEALING THE

PRISED IF THEY'D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE SAW IT WAS GONE -"

Mrs. Weasleys yells, a hundred times louder than usual, made the plates and spoons rattle on the table, and echoed deafeningly off the stone walls. People throughout the hall were swiveling around to see who had received the Howler, and Ron sank so low in his chair that only his crimson forehead could be seen.

"- LETTER FROM DUMBLEDORE LAST NIGHT, I THOUGHT YOUR FATHER WOULD DIE OF SHAME, WE DIDN'T BRING YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS, YOU AND HARRY COULD BOTH HAVE DIED -"

Harry had been wondering when his name was going to crop up. He tried very hard to look as though he couldn't hear the voice that was making his eardrums throb.

"-ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED - YOUR FATHER'S FACING AN INQUIRY AT WORK, IT'S ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT AND IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE WE'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME."

A ringing silence fell. The red envelope, which had dropped from Ron's hand, burst into flames and curled into ashes. Harry and Ron sat

stunned, as though a tidal wave had just passed over them. A few people laughed and, gradually, a babble of talk broke out again.

Hermione closed Voyages with Vampires and looked down at the top of Ron's head.

* 88

"Well, I don't know what you expected, Ron, but you -"

"Don't tell me I deserved it," snapped Ron.

Harry pushed his porridge away. His insides were burning with guilt. Mr. Weasley was facing an inquiry at work. After all Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had done for him over the summer ...

But he had no time to dwell on this; Professor McGonagall was moving along the Gryffindor table, handing out course schedules. Harry took his and saw that they had double Herbology with the Hufepuffs first.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together, crossed the vegetable patch, and made for the greenhouses, where the magical plants were kept. At least the Howler had done one good thing: Hermione seemed to think they had now been punished enough and was being perfectly friendly again.

As they neared the greenhouses they saw the rest of the class standing outside, waiting for Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had only just joined them when she came striding into view across the lawn, accompanied by Gilderoy Lockhart. Professor Sprout's arms were full of bandages, and with another twinge of guilt, Harry spotted the Whomping Willow in the distance, several of its branches now in slings.

Professor Sprout was a squat little witch who wore a patched hat over her flyaway hair; there was usually a large amount of earth on her clothes and her fingernails would have made Aunt Petunia faint. Gilderoy Lockhart, however, was immaculate in sweeping robes of turquoise, his golden hair shining under a perfectly positioned turquoise hat with gold trimming.

"Oh, hello there!" he called, beaming around at the assembled

89

students. "Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doctor a Whomping Willow! But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels . . ."

"Greenhouse three today, chaps!" said Professor Sprout, who was looking distinctly disgruntled, not at all her usual cheerful self.

There was a murmur of interest. They had only ever worked in greenhouse one before - greenhouse three housed far more interesting and dangerous plants. Professor Sprout took a large key from her belt and unlocked the door. Harry caught a whiff of damp earth and fertilizer mingling with the heavy perfume of some giant, umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling. He was about to follow Ron and Hermione inside when Lockhart's hand shot out.

"Harry! I've been wanting a word - you don't mind if he's a couple of minutes late, do you, Professor Sprout?"

Judging by Professor Sprout's scowl, she did mind, but Lockhart said, "That's the ticket," and closed the greenhouse door in her face.

"Harry," said Lockhart, his large white teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he shook his head. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Completely nonplussed, Harry said nothing.

"When I heard -well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. He was about to say so when Lockhart went on, "Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, Harry."

It was remarkable how he could show every one of those brilliant teeth even when he wasn't talking.

"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" said Lockhart. "Gave you the bug. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

"Oh, no, Professor, see -"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. "I understand. Natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste - and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head - but see here, young man, you can't start flying cars to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all that when you're older. Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! 'It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already!' But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-~~o~~-Must-Not-Be-Named!" He glanced at the lightning scar on Harry's forehead. "I know, I know - it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have - but it's a start, Harry, it's a start."

He gave Harry a hearty wink and strode off. Harry stood stunned for a few seconds, then, remembering he was supposed to be in the greenhouse, he opened the door and slid inside.

Professor Sprout was standing behind a trestle bench in the center of the greenhouse. About twenty pairs of different-colored earmuffs were lying on the bench. When Harry had taken his place between Ron and Hermione, she said, "We'll be repotting Mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Mandrake?"

To nobody's surprise, Hermione's hand was first into the air.

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"Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative," said Hermione, sounding as usual as though she had swallowed the textbook. "It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state."

"Excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor," said Professor Sprout. "The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?"

Hermione's hand narrowly missed Harry's glasses as it shot up again.

"The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she said promptly.

"Precisely. Take another ten points," said Professor Sprout. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young."

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They looked quite unremarkable to Harry, who didn't have the slightest idea what Hermione meant by the "cry" of the Mandrake.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are completely covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right - earmuffs on."

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

92

Harry let out a gasp of surprise that no one could hear.

Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp compost until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they will knock you out for several hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make sure your earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up.

"Four to a tray - there is a large supply of pots here - compost in the sacks over there - and be careful of the Venemous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were joined at their tray by a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy Harry knew by sight but had never spoken to.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said brightly, shaking Harry by the hand. "Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter... And you're Hermione Granger - always top in everything"

* 9%

(Hermione beamed as she had her hand shaken too) "- and Ron Weasley. Wasn't that your flying car?"

Ron didn't smile. The Howler was obviously still on his mind.

"That Lockhart's something, isn't he?" said Justin happily as they began filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. "Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? Id have died of fear if Id been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and - zap - just fantastic.

"My name was down for Eton, you know. I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family"

After that they didn't have much chance to talk. Their earmuffs were

back on and they needed to concentrate on the Mandrakes. Professor Sprout had made it look extremely easy, but it wasn't. The Mandrakes didn't like coming out of the earth, but didn't seem to want to go back into it either. They squirmed, kicked, flailed their sharp little fists, and gnashed their teeth; Harry spent ten whole minutes trying to squash a particularly fat one into a pot.

By the end of the class, Harry, like everyone else, was sweaty, aching, and covered in earth. Everyone traipsed back to the castle for a quick wash and then the Gryffindors hurried off to Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall's classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Everything Harry had learned last year seemed to have leaked out of his head during the summer. He was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he managed

* 94

to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desktop avoiding his wand.

Ron was having far worse problems. He had patched up his wand with some borrowed Spellotape, but it seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It kept crackling and sparking at odd moments, and every time Ron tried to transfigure his beetle it engulfed him in thick gray smoke that smelled of rotten eggs. Unable to see what he was doing, Ron accidentally squashed his beetle with his elbow and had to ask for a new one. Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased.

Harry was relieved to hear the lunch bell. His brain felt like a wrung sponge. Everyone filed out of the classroom except him and Ron, who was whacking his wand furiously on the desk.

"Stupid - useless - thing -"

"Write home for another one," Harry suggested as the wand let off a volley of bangs like a firecracker.

"Oh, yeah, and get another Howler back," said Ron, stuffing the now hissing wand into his bag. " `It's your own fault your wand got snapped -
""

They went down to lunch, where Ron's mood was not improved by Hermione's showing them the handful of perfect coat buttons she had produced in Transfiguration.

"What've we got this afternoon?" said Harry, hastily changing the subject.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione at once.

"Why," demanded Ron, seizing her schedule, "have you outlined all Lockhart's lessons in little hearts?"

Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing furiously.

* 95 *

They finished lunch and went outside into the overcast courtyard. Hermione sat down on a stone step and buried her nose in Voyages with Vampires again. Harry and Ron stood talking about Quidditch for several minutes before Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw the very small, mousy-haired boy he'd seen trying on the Sorting Hat last night staring at Harry as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera, and the moment Harry looked at him, he went bright red.

"All right, Harry? I'm -I'm Colin Creevey," he said breathlessly, taking a tentative step forward. "I'm in Gryffindor, too. D'you think - would it be all right if - can I have a picture?" he said, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated blankly.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Colin Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. "I know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead" (his eyes raked Harry's hairline) "and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll move." Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, "It's amazing here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home

to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you" - he looked imploringly at Harry - "maybe your friend could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?"

96

"Signed photos? You're giving out signed photos, Potter?"

Loud and scathing, Draco Malfoy's voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked, as he always was at Hogwarts, by his large and thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Everyone line up!" Malfoy roared to the crowd. "Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!"

"No, I'm not," said Harry angrily, his fists clenching. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"You're just jealous," piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe's neck.

"Jealous?" said Malfoy, who didn't need to shout anymore: half the courtyard was listening in. "Of what? I don't want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself."

Crabbe and Goyle were sniggering stupidly.

"Eat slugs, Malfoy," said Ron angrily. Crabbe stopped laughing and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

"Be careful, Weasley," sneered Malfoy. "You don't want to start any trouble or your Mommy'll have to come and take you away from school." He put on a shrill, piercing voice. "If you put another toe out of line' - "

A knot of Slytherin fifth-years nearby laughed loudly at this.

"Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter," smirked Malfoy. "It'd be worth more than his family's whole house -"

Ron whipped out his Spellotaped wand, but Hermione shut Voyages with Vampires with a snap and whispered, "Look out!"

"What's all this, what's all this?" Gilderoy Lockhart was striding

* 97

toward them, his turquoise robes swirling behind him. "Who's giving out signed photos?"

Harry started to speak but he was cut short as Lockhart flung an arm around his shoulders and thundered jovially, "Shouldn't have asked! We meet again, Harry!"

Pinned to Lockhart's side and burning with humiliation, Harry saw Malfoy slide smirking back into the crowd.

"Come on then, Mr. Creevey," said Lockhart, beaming at Colin.

"A double portrait, can't do better than that, and we'll both sign it for you."

Colin fumbled for his camera and took the picture as the bell rang behind them, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

"Off you go, move along there," Lockhart called to the crowd, and he set off back to the castle with Harry, who was wishing he knew a good Vanishing Spell, still clasped to his side.

"A word to the wise, Harry," said Lockhart paternally as they entered the building through a side door. "I covered up for you back there with young Creevey - if he was photographing me, too, your schoolmates won't think you're setting yourself up so much"

Deaf to Harry's stammers, Lockhart swept him down a corridor lined with staring students and up a staircase.

"Let me just say that handing out signed pictures at this stage of your career isn't sensible - looks a tad bigheaded, Harry, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you'll need to keep a stack handy wherever you go, but" - he gave a little chortle - "I don't think you're quite there yet."

They had reached Lockhart's classroom and he let Harry go at

98

last. Harry yanked his robes straight and headed for a seat at the very back of the class, where he busied himself with piling all seven of Lockhart's books in front of him, so that he could avoid looking at the real thing.

The rest of the class came clattering in, and Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of Harry.

"You could've fried an egg on your face" said Ron. "You'd better hope Creevey doesn't meet Ginny, or they'll be starting a Harry Potter fan club."

"Shut up," snapped Harry. The last thing he needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase "Harry Potter fan club."

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award - but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!"

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books -well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about

just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in -"

When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes - start - now!"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart 's favorite color?
2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?
3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class.

"Tut, tut - hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in Year with the Yeti. And a few of you need to read Wanderings with Werewolves more carefully - I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples - though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogdeds Old Firewhisky!"

He gave them another roguish wink. Ron was now staring at Lockhart with an expression of disbelief on his face; Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were sitting in front, were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention and gave a start when he mentioned her name.

". . . but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions - good girl! In fact" - he flipped her paper over - "full marks! Where is Miss Hermione Granger?"

100

Hermione raised a trembling hand.

"Excellent!" beamed Lockhart. "Quite excellent! Take ten points for Gryffindor! And so - to business -"

He bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it.

"Now - be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm."

In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better

look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. Dean and Seamus had stopped laughing now. Neville was cowering in his front row seat.

"I must ask you not to scream," said Lockhart in a low voice. "It might provoke them."

As the whole class held its breath, Lockhart whipped off the cover.

"Yes," he said dramatically. "Freshly caught Cornish pixies. "

Seamus Finnigan couldn't control himself. He let out a snort of laughter that even Lockhart couldn't mistake for a scream of terror.

"Yes?" He smiled at Seamus.

"Well, they're not - they're not very - dangerous, are they?" Seamus choked.

"Don't be so sure!" said Lockhart, wagging a finger annoyingly at Seamus. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!"

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high, with pointed faces and voices so shrill it was like listening to a lot of budgies arguing. The moment the cover had been removed, they

101

had started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them.

"Right, then," Lockhart said loudly. "Let's see what you make of them!" And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium. The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, up-ended the waste basket, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed window; within minutes, half the

class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling.

"Come on now - round them up, round them up, they're only pixies," Lockhart shouted.

He rolled up his sleeves, brandished his wand, and bellowed,

"Peskipiksi Pesternomi!"

It had absolutely no effect; one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window, too. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Neville, who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up, caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were almost at the door, and said, "Well, I'll ask you three to just nip the rest of them back into their cage." He swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

102

"Can you believe him?" roared Ron as one of the remaining pixies bit him painfully on the ear.

"He just wants to give us some hands-on experience," said Hermione, immobilizing two pixies at once with a clever Freezing Charm and stuffing them back into their cage.

"Hands on?" said Harry, who was trying to grab a pixie dancing out of reach with its tongue out. "Hermione, he didn't have a clue what he was doing -"

"Rubbish," said Hermione. "You've read his books - look at all those amazing things he's done -"

"He says he's done," Ron muttered.

arry spent a lot of time over the next few days dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. Harder

to avoid was Colin Creevey, who seemed to have memorized Harry's schedule. Nothing seemed to give Colin a bigger thrill than to say, "All right, Harry?" six or seven times a day and hear, "Hello, Colin," back, however exasperated Harry sounded when he said it.

Hedwig was still angry with Harry about the disastrous car journey and Ron's wand was still malfunctioning, surpassing itself on Friday morning by shooting out of Ron's hand in Charms and hitting tiny old Professor Flitwick squarely between the eyes, creating a large, throbbing green boil where it had struck. So with one thing and another, Harry was quite glad to reach the weekend. He, Ron, and Hermione were planning to visit Hagrid on Saturday morning. Harry, however, was shaken awake several hours earlier

104

than he would have liked by Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Whassamatter?" said Harry groggily.

"Quidditch practice!" said Wood. "Come on!"

Harry squinted at the window. There was a thin mist hanging across the pink-and-gold sky. Now that he was awake, he couldn't understand how he could have slept through the racket the birds were making.

"Oliver," Harry croaked. "It's the crack of dawn."

"Exactly," said Wood. He was a tall and burly sixth year and, at the moment, his eyes were gleaming with a crazed enthusiasm. "It's part of our new training program. Come on, grab your broom, and let's go," said Wood heartily. "None of the other teams have started training yet; we're going to be first off the mark this year -"

Yawning and shivering slightly, Harry climbed out of bed and tried to find his Quidditch robes.

"Good man," said Wood. "Meet you on the field in fifteen minutes."

When he'd found his scarlet team robes and pulled on his cloak for warmth, Harry scribbled a note to Ron explaining where he'd gone and went down the spiral staircase to the common room, his Nimbus Two Thousand on his shoulder. He had just reached the portrait hole when there was a clatter behind him and Colin Creevey came dashing down the spiral staircase, his camera swinging madly around his neck and something clutched in his hand.

"I heard someone saying your name on the stairs, Harry! Look what I've got here! I've had it developed, I wanted to show you -"

105

Harry looked bemusedly at the photograph Colin was brandishing under his nose.

A moving, black-and-white Lockhart was tugging hard on an arm Harry recognized as his own. He was pleased to see that his photographic self was putting up a good fight and refusing to be dragged into view. As Harry watched, Lockhart gave up and slumped, panting, against the white edge of the picture.

"Will you sign it?" said Colin eagerly.

"No," said Harry flatly, glancing around to check that the room was really deserted. "Sorry, Colin, I'm in a hurry - Quidditch practice -"

He climbed through the portrait hole.

"Oh, wow! Wait for me! I've never watched a Quidditch game before!"

Colin scrambled through the hole after him.

"It'll be really boring," Harry said quickly, but Colin ignored him, his face shining with excitement.

"You were the youngest House player in a hundred years, weren't you, Harry? Weren't you?" said Colin, trotting alongside him. "You must be brilliant. I've never flown. Is it easy? Is that your own broom? Is that the best one there is?"

Harry didn't know how to get rid of him. It was like having an extremely talkative shadow.

"I don't really understand Quidditch," said Colin breathlessly. "Is it true there are four balls? And two of them fly around trying to knock people off their brooms?"

"Yes," said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the complicated rules of Quidditch. "They're called Bludgers. There are two Beaters

), *106*

on each team who carry clubs to beat the Bludgers away from their side. Fred and George Weasley are the Gryffindor Beaters."

"And what are the other balls for?" Colin asked, tripping down a couple of steps because he was gazing open-mouthed at Harry.

"Well, the Quafe - that's the biggish red one - is the one that scores goals. Three Chasers on each team throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through the goal posts at the end of the pitch - they're three long poles with hoops on the end."

"And the fourth ball -"

"- is the Golden Snitch," said Harry, "and it's very small, very fast, and difficult to catch. But that's what the Seeker's got to do, because a game of Quidditch doesn't end until the Snitch has been caught. And whichever team's Seeker gets the Snitch earns his team an extra hundred and fifty points."

"And you're the Gryffindor Seeker, aren't you?" said Colin in awe.

"Yes," said Harry as they left the castle and started across the dew-drenched grass. "And there's the Keeper, too. He guards the goal posts. That's it, really."

But Colin didn't stop questioning Harry all the way down the sloping lawns to the Quidditch field, and Harry only shook him off when he reached the changing rooms; Colin called after him in a piping voice, "I'll go and get a good seat, Harry!" and hurried off to the stands.

The rest of the Gryffindor team were already in the changing room. Wood was the only person who looked truly awake. Fred and George Weasley were sitting, puffy-eyed and touslehaired, next to fourth year Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nodding off against the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie

107

Bell and Angelina Johnson, were yawning side by side opposite them.

"There you are, Harry, what kept you?" said Wood briskly. "Now, I wanted a quick talk with you all before we actually get onto the field, because I spent the summer devising a whole new training program, which I really think will make all the difference

Wood was holding up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in differentcolored inks. He took out his wand, tapped the board, and the arrows began to wiggle over the diagram like caterpillars. As Wood launched into a speech about his new tactics, Fred Weasley's head drooped right onto Alicia Spinnet's shoulder and he began to snore.

The first board took nearly twenty minutes to explain, but there was another board under that, and a third under that one. Harry sank into a stupor as Wood droned on and on.

"So," said Wood, at long last, jerking Harry from a wistful fantasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very moment up at the castle. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got a question, Oliver," said George, who had woken with a start. "Why couldn't you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?"

Wood wasn't pleased.

"Now, listen here, you lot," he said, glowering at them all. "We should have won the Quidditch cup last year. We're easily the best team. But unfortunately -owing to circumstances beyond our control -"

108

Harry shifted guiltily in his seat. He had been unconscious in the hospital wing for the final match of the previous year, meaning that Gryffindor had been a player short and had suffered their worst defeat in three hundred years.

Wood took a moment to regain control of himself. Their last defeat was clearly still torturing him.

"So this year, we train harder than ever before Okay, let's go and put our new theories into practice!" Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stifflegged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands.

"Aren't you finished yet?" called Ron incredulously.

"Haven't even started," said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall. "Wood's been teaching us new moves."

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far more effectively than Wood's long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

"What's that funny clicking noise?" called Fred as they hurtled around the corner.

Harry looked into the stands. Colin was sitting in one of the highest seats, his camera raised, taking picture after picture, the sound strangely magnified in the deserted stadium.

io9

"Look this way, Harry! This way!" he cried shrilly.

"Who's that?" said Fred.

"No idea," Harry lied, putting on a spurt of speed that took him as far away as possible from Colin.

"What's going on?" said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward them. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's in Gryffindor," said Harry quickly.

"And the Slytherins don't need a spy, Oliver," said George.

"What makes you say that?" said Wood testily.

"Because they're here in person," said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

"I don't believe it!" Wood hissed in outrage. "I booked the field for today! We'll see about this!"

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and George followed.

"Flint!" Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. "This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of trollish cunning on his face as he replied, "Plenty of room for all of us, Wood."

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

"But I booked the field!" said Wood, positively spitting with rage. "I booked it!"

110

"Ah," said Flint. "But I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker."

"You've got a new Seeker?" said Wood, distracted. "Where?"

And from behind the six large figures before them came a seventh, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Aren't you Lucius Malfoy's son?" said Fred, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

"Funny you should mention Draco's father," said Flint as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. "Let me show you the generous gift he's made to the Slytherin team."

All seven of them held out their broomsticks. Seven highly polished, brand-new handles and seven sets of fine gold lettering spelling the words Nimbus Two Thousand and One gleamed under the Gryffindors' noses in the early morning sun.

"Very latest model. Only came out last month," said Flint carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. "I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps" - he smiled nastily at Fred and George, who were both clutching Cleansweep Fives - "sweeps the board with them."

None of the Gryffindor team could think of anything to say for a moment. Malfoy was smirking so broadly his cold eyes were reduced to slits.

"Oh, look," said Flint. "A field invasion."

Ron and Hermione were crossing the grass to see what was going on.

111

"What's happening?" Ron asked Harry. "Why aren't you playing? And what's he doing here?"

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

"I'm the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley," said Malfoy, smugly. "Everyone's just been admiring the brooms my father's bought our team.

Ron gaped, open-mouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him.

"Good, aren't they?" said Malfoy smoothly. "But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them."

The Slytherin team howled with laughter.

"At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in," said Hermione sharply. "They got in on pure talent."

The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered.

"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him, Alicia shrieked, "How dare you!" ; and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, "You'll pay for that one, Malfoy!" and pointed it furiously under Flint's arm at Malfoys face.

A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stomach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass.

12

"Ron! Ron! Are you all right?" squealed Hermione.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he

gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.

The Slytherin team were paralyzed with laughter. Flint was doubled up, hanging onto his new broomstick for support. Malfoy was on all fours, banging the ground with his fist. The Gryffindors were gathered around Ron, who kept belching large, glistening slugs. Nobody seemed to want to touch him.

"We'd better get him to Hagrid's, it's nearest," said Harry to Hermione, who nodded bravely, and the pair of them pulled Ron up by the arms.

"What happened, Harry? What happened? Is he ill? But you can cure him, can't you?" Colin had run down from his seat and was now dancing alongside them as they left the field. Ron gave a huge heave and more slugs dribbled down his front.

"Oooh," said Colin, fascinated and raising his camera. "Can you hold him still, Harry?"

"Get out of the way, Colin!" said Harry angrily. He and Hermione supported Ron out of the stadium and across the grounds toward the edge of the forest.

"Nearly there, Ron," said Hermione as the gamekeeper's cabin came into view. "You'll be all right in a minute - almost there -"

They were within twenty feet of Hagrid's house when the front door opened, but it wasn't Hagrid who emerged. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of palest mauve today, came striding out.

"Quick, behind here," Harry hissed, dragging Ron behind a nearby bush. Hermione followed, somewhat reluctantly.

113 *

"It's a simple matter if you know what you're doing!" Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. "If you need help, you know where I am! I'll let you have a copy of my book. I'm surprised you haven't already got one - I'll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!" And he strode away toward the castle.

Harry waited until Lockhart was out of sight, then pulled Ron out of the bush and up to Hagrid's front door. They knocked urgently.

Hagrid appeared at once, looking very grumpy, but his expression brightened when he saw who it was.

"Bin wonderin' when you'd come ter see me - come in, come in - thought you mighta bin Professor Lockhart back again -"

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other. Hagrid didn't seem perturbed by Ron's slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into a chair.

"Better out than in," he said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. "Get 'em all up, Ron."

"I don't think there's anything to do except wait for it to stop," said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. "That's a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a broken wand -"

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

"What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?" Harry asked, scratching Fang's ears.

"Givin' me advice on gettin' kelpies out of a well," growled

114

Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. "Like I don' know. An' bangin' on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I'll eat my kettle."

It was most unlike Hagrid to criticize a Hogwarts' teacher, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Hermione, however, said in a voice somewhat higher than usual, "I think you're being a bit unfair. Professor Dumbledore obviously thought he was the best man for

the job -"

"He was the on' man for the job," said Hagrid, offering them a Y

plate of treacle fudge, while Ron coughed squelchily into his basin.

"An' I mean the on' one. Gettin' very difficult ter find anyone fer Y

the Dark Arts job. People aren't too keen ter take it on, see. They're startin' ter think it's jinxed. No one's lasted long fer a while now. So tell me," said Hagrid, jerking his head at Ron. "Who was he tryin' ter curse?"

"Malfoy called Hermione something - it must've been really bad, because everyone went wild."

"It was bad," said Ron hoarsely, emerging over the tabletop looking pale and sweaty. "Malfoy called her `Mudblood,' Hagrid -"

Ron dived out of sight again as a fresh wave of slugs made their appearance. Hagrid looked outraged.

"He didn'!" he growled at Hermione.

"He did," she said. "But I don't know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course -"

"It's about the most insulting thing he could think of," gasped Ron, coming back up. "Mudblood's a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born - you know, non-magic parents. There are

115

some wizards - like Malfoy's family - who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood." He gave a small burp, and a single slug fell into his outstretched hand. He threw it into the basin and continued, "I mean, the rest of us know it doesn't make any difference at all. Look at Neville Longbottom - he's pure-blood and he can hardly stand a cauldron the right way up."

"An' they haven't invented a spell our Hermione can' do," said Hagrid proudly, making Hermione go a brilliant shade of magenta.

"It's a disgusting thing to call someone," said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. "Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It's ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn't married Muggles we'd've died out."

He retched and ducked out of sight again.

"Well, I don't blame yeh fer tryin' ter curse him, Ron," said Hagrid loudly over the thuds of more slugs hitting the basin. "Bu' maybe it was a good thing yer wand backfired. 'Spect Lucius Malfoy would've come marchin' up ter school if yeh'd cursed his son. Least yer not in trouble."

Harry would have pointed out that trouble didn't come much worse than having slugs pouring out of your mouth, but he couldn't; Hagrid's treacle fudge had cemented his jaws together.

"Harry," said Hagrid abruptly as though struck by a sudden thought. "Gotta bone ter pick with yeh. I've heard you've bin givin' out signed photos. How come I haven't got one?"

Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

"I have not been giving out signed photos," he said hotly. "If Lockhart's still spreading that around -"

116

But then he saw that Hagrid was laughing.

"I'm on'y jokin'," he said, patting Harry genially on the back and sending him face first into the table. "I knew yeh hadn't really. I told Lockhart yeh didn' need teh. Yer more famous than him without tryin'."

"Bet he didn't like that," said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his chin.

"Don't think he did," said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling. "An' then I told him Id never read one o' his books an' he decided ter go. Treacle fudge, Ron?" he added as Ron reappeared.

"No thanks," said Ron weakly. "Better not risk it."

"Come an' see what I've bin growin'," said Hagrid as Harry and Hermione finished the last of their tea.

In the small vegetable patch behind Hagrid's house were a dozen of the largest pumpkins Harry had ever seen. Each was the size of a large boulder.

"Gettin' on well, aren't they?" said Hagrid happily. "Fer the Halloween feast ... should be big enough by then."

"What've you been feeding them?" said Harry.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder to check that they were alone.

"Well, I've bin givin' them - you know - a bit o' help -"

Harry noticed Hagrid's flowery pink umbrella leaning against the back wall of the cabin. Harry had had reason to believe before now that this umbrella was not all it looked; in fact, he had the strong impression that Hagrid's old school wand was concealed inside it. Hagrid wasn't supposed to use magic. He had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, but Harry had never found out why -any mention of the matter and Hagrid would clear his

117

throat loudly and become mysteriously deaf until the subject was changed.

"An Engorgement Charm, I suppose?" said Hermione, halfway between disapproval and amusement. "Well, you've done a good job on them."

"That's what yer little sister said," said Hagrid, nodding at Ron. "Met her jus' yesterday." Hagrid looked sideways at Harry, his beard twitching. "Said she was jus' lookin' round the grounds, but I reckon she was hopin' she might run inter someone else at my house." He winked at Harry. "If yeh ask me, she wouldn't say no ter a signed -"

"Oh, shut up," said Harry. Ron snorted with laughter and the ground

was sprayed with slugs.

"Watch it!" Hagrid roared, pulling Ron away from his precious pumpkins.

It was nearly lunchtime and as Harry had only had one bit of treacle fudge since dawn, he was keen to go back to school to eat. They said good-bye to Hagrid and walked back up to the castle, Ron hiccupping occasionally, but only bringing up two very small slugs.

They had barely set foot in the cool entrance hall when a voice rang out, "There you are, Potter - Weasley." Professor McGonagall was walking toward them, looking stern. "You will both do your detentions this evening."

"What're we doing, Professor?" said Ron, nervously suppressing a burp.

"You will be polishing the silver in the trophy room with Mr. Filch," said Professor McGonagall. "And no magic, Weasley - elbow grease."

118

Ron gulped. Argus Filch, the caretaker, was loathed by every student in the school.

"And you, Potter, will be helping Professor Lockhart answer his fan mail," said Professor McGonagall.

"Oh n - Professor, can't I go and do the trophy room, too?" said Harry desperately.

"Certainly not," said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. "Professor Lockhart requested you particularly. Eight o'clock sharp, both of you."

Harry and Ron slouched into the Great Hall in states of deepest gloom, Hermione behind them, wearing a well-you-did-break-school-rules sort of expression. Harry didn't enjoy his shepherd's pie as much as he'd thought. Both he and Ron felt they'd got the worse deal.

"Filch'll have me there all night," said Ron heavily. "No magic! There

must be about a hundred cups in that room. I'm no good at Muggle cleaning."

"I'd swap anytime," said Harry hollowly. "I've had loads of practice with the Dursleys. Answering Lockhart's fan mail ... he'll be a nightmare

Saturday afternoon seemed to melt away, and in what seemed like no time, it was five minutes to eight, and Harry was dragging his feet along the second-floor corridor to Lockhart's office. He gritted his teeth and knocked.

The door flew open at once. Lockhart beamed down at him.

"Ah, here's the scalawag!" he said. "Come in, Harry, come in -"

Shining brightly on the walls by the light of many candles were countless framed photographs of Lockhart. He had even signed a few of them. Another large pile lay on his desk.

"You can address the envelopes!" Lockhart told Harry, as though this was a huge treat. "This first one's to Gladys Gudgeon, bless her - huge fan of mine -"

The minutes snailed by. Harry let Lockhart's voice wash over him, occasionally saying, "Mmm" and "Right" and "Yeah." Now and then he caught a phrase like, "Fame's a fickle friend, Harry," or "Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that."

The candles burned lower and lower, making the light dance over the many moving faces of Lockhart watching him. Harry moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth envelope, writing out Veronica Smethley's address. It must be nearly time to leave, Harry thought miserably, please let it be nearly time...

And then he heard something - something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart's prattle about his fans.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breathtaking, ice-cold venom.

"Come ... come to me.... Let me rip you.... Let me tear you Let me kill you . .
.."

Harry gave a huge jump and a large lilac blot appeared on Veronica Smethley's street.

"What?" he said loudly.

"I know!" said Lockhart. "Six solid months at the top of the best-seller list! Broke all records!"

"No," said Harry frantically. "That voice!"

"Sorry?" said Lockhart, looking puzzled. "What voice?"

"That - that voice that said - didn't you hear it?"

Lockhart was looking at Harry in high astonishment.

* 3-20 *

"What are you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you're getting a litde drowsy? Great Scott - look at the time! We've been here nearly four hours! Id never have believed it - the time's flown, hasn't it?"

Harry didn't answer. He was straining his ears to hear the voice again, but there was no sound now except for Lockhart telling him he mustn't expect a treat like this every time he got detention. Feeling dazed, Harry left.

It was so late that the Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Harry went straight up to the dormitory. Ron wasn't back yet. Harry pulled on his pajamas, got into bed, and waited. Half an hour later, Ron arrived, nursing his right arm and bringing a strong smell of polish into the darkened room.

"My muscles have all seized up," he groaned, sinking on his bed.
"Fourteen times he made me buff up that Quidditch cup before he was satisfied. And then I had another slug attack all over a Special Award for Services to the School. Took ages to get the slime off... How was it with Lockhart?"

Keeping his voice low so as not to wake Neville, Dean, and Seamus, Harry told Ron exactly what he had heard.

"And Lockhart said he couldn't hear it?" said Ron. Harry could see him frowning in the moonlight. "D'you think he was lying? But I don't get it - even someone invisible would've had to open the door."

"I know," said Harry, lying back in his four-poster and staring at the canopy above him. "I don't get it either."

* 12-1 *

122

October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup potion worked instantly, though it left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley, who had been looking pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud..

123

Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy practice session. Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slytherin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, ". . . don't fulfill their requirements . . . half an inch, if that . . ."

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff, which concealed the fact that his neck was almost completely severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.

"You look troubled, young Potter," said Nick, folding a transparent letter as he spoke and tucking it inside his doublet.

"So do you," said Harry.

"Ah," Nearly Headless Nick waved an elegant hand, "a matter of no importance. . . . It's not as though I really wanted to join. . . . Thought I'd apply, but apparently I 'don't fulfill requirements' -"

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

"But you would think, wouldn't you," he erupted suddenly, pulling the letter back out of his pocket, "that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?"

124

"Oh - yes," said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

"I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean, and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However -" Nearly Headless Nick shook his letter open and read furiously: "'We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not fulfill our requirements. With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore.'"

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

"Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most people would think that's good and beheaded, but oh, no, it's not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore."

Nearly Headless Nick took several deep breaths and then said, in a far calmer tone, "So - what's bothering you? Anything I can do?"

"No," said Harry. "Not unless you know where we can get seven free Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones for our match against Sly -"

The rest of Harry's sentence was drowned out by a high-pitched mewling from somewhere near his ankles. He looked down and found himself gazing into a pair of lamp-like yellow eyes. It was Mrs. Norris, the skeletal gray cat who was used by the caretaker, Argus Filch, as a sort of deputy in his endless battle against students.

"You'd better get out of here, Harry," said Nick quickly. "Filch isn't in a

good mood - he's got the flu and some third years accidentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five. He's been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place -"

.125

"Right," said Harry, backing away from the accusing stare of Mrs. Norris, but not quickly enough. Drawn to the spot by the mysterious power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat, Argus Filch burst suddenly through a tapestry to Harry's right, wheezing and looking wildly about for the rule-breaker. There was a thick tartan scarf bound around his head, and his nose was unusually purple.

"Filth!" he shouted, his jowls aquiver, his eyes popping alarmingly as he pointed at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry's Quidditch robes. "Mess and muck everywhere! I've had enough of it, I tell you! Follow me, Potter!"

So Harry waved a gloomy good-bye to Nearly Headless Nick and followed Filch back downstairs, doubling the number of muddy footprints on the floor.

Harry had never been inside Filch's office before; it was a place most students avoided. The room was dingy and windowless, lit by a single oil lamp dangling from the low ceiling. A faint smell of fried fish lingered about the place. Wooden filing cabinets stood around the walls; from their labels, Harry could see that they contained details of every pupil Filch had ever punished. Fred and George Weasley had an entire drawer to themselves. A highly polished collection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling. Filch grabbed a quill from a pot on his desk and began shuffling around looking for parchment.

"Dung," he muttered furiously, "great sizzling dragon bogies . . . frog brains . . . rat intestines . . . I've had enough of it . . . make an example . . . where's the form . . . yes . . ."

.126

He retrieved a large roll of parchment from his desk drawer and stretched it out in front of him, dipping his long black quill into the ink pot.

"Name . . . Harry Potter. Crime . . ."

"It was only a bit of mud!" said Harry.

"It's only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it's an extra hour scrubbing!" shouted Filch, a drip shivering unpleasantly at the end of his bulbous nose.

"Crime . . . befouling the castle . . . suggested sentence . . ."

Dabbing at his streaming nose, Filch squinted unpleasantly at Harry who

waited with bated breath for his sentence to fall.

But as Filch lowered his quill, there was a great BANG! on the ceiling of the office, which made the oil lamp rattle.

"PEEVES!" Filch roared, flinging down his quill in a transport of rage. "I'll have you this time, I'll have you!"

And without a backward glance at Harry, Filch ran flat-footed from the office, Mrs. Norris streaking alongside him.

Peeves was the school poltergeist, a grinning, airborne menace who lived to cause havoc and distress. Harry didn't much like Peeves, but couldn't help feeling grateful for his timing. Hopefully, whatever Peeves had done (and it sounded as though he'd wrecked something very big this time) would distract Filch from Harry.

Thinking that he should probably wait for Filch to come back, Harry sank into a moth-eaten chair next to the desk. There was only one thing on it apart from his half-completed form: a large, glossy, purple envelope with silver lettering on the front. With a quick glance at the door to check that Filch wasn't on his way back, Harry picked up the envelope and read: kwikspell A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic.

127

Intrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said: Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork? There is an answer! Kwikspell is an all-new, fail-safe, quick-result, easy-learn course. Hundreds of witches and wizards have benefited from the Kwikspell method! Madam Z. Nettles of Topsham writes: "I had no memory for incantations and my potions were a family joke! Now, after a Kwikspell course, I am the center of attention at parties and friends beg for the recipe of my Scintillation Solution!" Warlock D. J. Prod of Didsbury says: "My wife used to sneer at my feeble charms, but one month into your fabulous Kwikspell course and I succeeded in turning her into a yak! Thank you, Kwikspell!"

Fascinated, Harry thumbed through the rest of the envelope's contents. Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn't a proper wizard? Harry was just reading "Lesson One: Holding Your Wand (Some Useful Tips)" when shuffling footsteps outside told him Filch was coming back. Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, Harry threw it back onto the desk just as the door opened.

Filch was looking triumphant.

"That vanishing cabinet was extremely valuable!" he was saying gleefully to Mrs. Norris. "We'll have Peeves out this time, my sweet -"

His eyes fell on Harry and then darted to the Kwikspell envelope, which, Harry realized too late, was lying two feet away from where it had started. Filch's pasty face went brick red. Harry braced himself for a tidal wave of fury. Filch hobbled across to his desk, snatched up the envelope, and threw it into a drawer.

"Have you - did you read -?" he sputtered.

.128

"No," Harry lied quickly.

Filch's knobbly hands were twisting together.

"If I thought you'd read my private - not that it's mine - for a friend - be that as it may - however -"

Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked madder. His eyes were popping, a tic was going in one of his pouchy cheeks, and the tartan scarf didn't help.

"Very well - go - and don't breathe a word - not that - however, if you didn't read - go now, I have to write up Peeves' report - go -"

Amazed at his luck, Harry sped out of the office, up the corridor, and back upstairs. To escape from Filch's office without punishment was probably some kind of school record.

"Harry! Harry! Did it work?"

Nearly Headless Nick came gliding out of a classroom. Behind him, Harry could see the wreckage of a large black-and-gold cabinet that appeared to have been dropped from a great height.

"I persuaded Peeves to crash it right over Filch's office," said Nick eagerly.

"Thought it might distract him -"

"Was that you?" said Harry gratefully. "Yeah, it worked, I didn't even get detention. Thanks, Nick!"

They set off up the corridor together. Nearly Headless Nick, Harry noticed, was still holding Sir Patrick's rejection letter..

129

"I wish there was something I could do for you about the Headless Hunt," Harry said.

Nearly Headless Nick stopped in his tracks and Harry walked right through him. He wished he hadn't; it was like stepping through an icy shower.

"But there is something you could do for me," said Nick excitedly. "Harry - would I be asking too much - but no, you wouldn't want -"

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Well, this Halloween will be my five hundredth deathday," said Nearly Headless Nick, drawing himself up and looking dignified.

"Oh," said Harry, not sure whether he should look sorry or happy about this.

"Right."

"I'm holding a party down in one of the roomier dungeons. Friends will be coming from all over the country. It would be such an honor if you would attend. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger would be most welcome, too, of course - but I daresay you'd rather go to the school feast?" He watched Harry on tenterhooks.

"No," said Harry quickly, "I'll come -"

"My dear boy! Harry Potter, at my deathday party! And" - he hesitated, looking excited - "do you think you could possibly mention to Sir Patrick how very frightening and impressive you find me?"

"Of - of course," said Harry.

Nearly Headless Nick beamed at him. "A deathday party?" said Hermione keenly when Harry had changed at last and joined her and Ron in the common room. "I bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those - it'll be fascinating!".

130

"Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?" said Ron, who was halfway through his Potions homework and grumpy. "Sounds dead depressing to me. . . ."

Rain was still lashing the windows, which were now inky black, but inside all looked bright and cheerful. The firelight glowed over the countless squashy armchairs where people sat reading, talking, doing homework or, in the case of Fred and George Weasley, trying to find out what would happen if you fed a Filibuster firework to a salamander. Fred had "rescued" the brilliant orange, fire-dwelling lizard from a Care of Magical Creatures class and it was now smouldering gently on a table surrounded by a knot of curious people.

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch and the Kwikspell course when the salamander suddenly whizzed into the air, emitting loud sparks and bangs as it whirled wildly round the room. The sight of Percy bellowing himself hoarse at Fred and George, the spectacular display of tangerine stars showering from the salamander's mouth, and its escape into the fire, with accompanying explosions, drove both Filch and the Kwikspell envelope from Harry's mind. By the time Halloween arrived, Harry was regretting his rash promise to go to the deathday party. The rest of the school was happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had been decorated with the usual live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in, and there were rumors that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of dancing skeletons for the entertainment.

"A promise is a promise," Hermione reminded Harry bossily. "You said

you'd go to the deathday party."

So at seven o'clock, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked straight past the doorway to the packed Great Hall, which was glittering invitingly with gold plates and candles, and directed their steps instead toward the dungeons.

.131

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, too, though the effect was far from cheerful: These were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took. As Harry shivered and drew his robes tightly around him, he heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

"Is that supposed to be music?" Ron whispered. They turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

"My dear friends," he said mournfully. "Welcome, welcome . . . so pleased you could come. . . ."

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand more black candles. Their breath rose in a mist before them; it was like stepping into a freezer.

"Shall we have a look around?" Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

"Careful not to walk through anyone," said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. They passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead. Harry wasn't surprised to see that the Bloody Baron, a gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains, was being given a wide berth by the other ghosts.

.132

"Oh, no," said Hermione, stopping abruptly. "Turn back, turn back, I don't want to talk to Moaning Myrtle -"

"Who?" said Harry as they backtracked quickly.

"She haunts one of the toilets in the girls' bathroom on the first floor," said Hermione.

"She haunts a toilet?"

"Yes. It's been out-of-order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I could avoid it; it's awful trying to have a pee with her wailing at you -"

"Look, food!" said Ron.

On the other side of the dungeon was a long table, also covered in black velvet. They approached it eagerly but next moment had stopped in their tracks, horrified. The smell was quite disgusting. Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on salvers; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mold and, in pride of place, an enormous gray cake in the shape of a tombstone, with tar-like icing forming the words, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington

died 31st October, 1492

Harry watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

"Can you taste it if you walk through it?" Harry asked him.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

.133

"I expect they've let it rot to give it a stronger flavor," said Hermione knowledgeablely, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

"Can we move? I feel sick," said Ron.

They had barely turned around, however, when a little man swooped suddenly from under the table and came to a halt in midair before them.

"Hello, Peeves," said Harry cautiously.

Unlike the ghosts around them, Peeves the Poltergeist was the very reverse of pale and transparent. He was wearing a bright orange party hat, a revolving bow tie, and a broad grin on his wide, wicked face.

"Nibbles?" he said sweetly, offering them a bowl of peanuts covered in fungus.

"No thanks," said Hermione.

"Heard you talking about poor Myrtle," said Peeves, his eyes dancing.

"Rude you was about poor Myrtle." He took a deep breath and bellowed,

"OY! MYRTLE!"

"Oh, no, Peeves, don't tell her what I said, she'll be really upset," Hermione whispered frantically. "I didn't mean it, I don't mind her - er, hello, Myrtle."

The squat ghost of a girl had glided over. She had the glummiest face Harry had ever seen, half-hidden behind lank hair and thick, pearly spectacles.

"What?" she said sulkily.

"How are you, Myrtle?" said Hermione in a falsely bright voice. "It's nice to

see you out of the toilet."

.134

Myrtle sniffed.

"Miss Granger was just talking about you -" said Peeves slyly in Myrtle's ear.

"Just saying - saying - how nice you look tonight," said Hermione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously.

"You're making fun of me," she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

"No - honestly - didn't I just say how nice Myrtle's looking?" said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron painfully in the ribs.

"Oh, yeah -"

"She did -"

"Don't lie to me," Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. "D'you think I don't know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!"

"You've forgotten pimply," Peeves hissed in her ear.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon.

Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, "Pimply! Pimply!"

"Oh, dear," said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them through the crowd.

.135

"Enjoying yourselves?"

"Oh, yes," they lied.

"Not a bad turnout," said Nearly Headless Nick proudly. "The Wailing Widow came all the way up from Kent. . . . It's nearly time for my speech, I'd better go and warn the orchestra. . . ."

The orchestra, however, stopped playing at that very moment. They, and everyone else in the dungeon, fell silent, looking around in excitement, as a hunting horn sounded.

"Oh, here we go," said Nearly Headless Nick bitterly.

Through the dungeon wall burst a dozen ghost horses, each ridden by a headless horseman. The assembly clapped wildly; Harry started to clap, too, but stopped quickly at the sight of Nick's face.

The horses galloped into the middle of the dance floor and halted, rearing and plunging. At the front of the pack was a large ghost who held his bearded head under his arm, from which position he was blowing the horn.

The ghost leapt down, lifted his head high in the air so he could see over the crowd (everyone laughed), and strode over to Nearly Headless Nick, squashing his head back onto his neck.

"Nick!" he roared. "How are you? Head still hanging in there?"

He gave a hearty guffaw and clapped Nearly Headless Nick on the shoulder.

"Welcome, Patrick," said Nick stiffly.

"Live 'uns!" said Sir Patrick, spotting Harry, Ron, and Hermione and giving a huge, fake jump of astonishment, so that his head fell off again (the crowd howled with laughter).

.136

"Very amusing," said Nearly Headless Nick darkly.

"Don't mind Nick!" shouted Sir Patrick's head from the floor. "Still upset we won't let him join the Hunt! But I mean to say - look at the fellow -"

"I think," said Harry hurriedly, at a meaningful look from Nick, "Nick's very - frightening and - er -"

"Ha!" yelled Sir Patrick's head. "Bet he asked you to say that!"

"If I could have everyone's attention, it's time for my speech!" said Nearly Headless Nick loudly, striding toward the podium and climbing into an icy blue spotlight.

"My late lamented lords, ladies, and gentlemen, it is my great sorrow . . ."

But nobody heard much more. Sir Patrick and the rest of the Headless Hunt had just started a game of Head Hockey and the crowd were turning to watch. Nearly Headless Nick tried vainly to recapture his audience, but gave up as Sir Patrick's head went sailing past him to loud cheers.

Harry was very cold by now, not to mention hungry.

"I can't stand much more of this," Ron muttered, his teeth chattering, as the orchestra ground back into action and the ghosts swept back onto the dance floor.

"Let's go," Harry agreed.

They backed toward the door, nodding and beaming at anyone who looked at them, and a minute later were hurrying back up the passageway full of black candles.

"Pudding might not be finished yet," said Ron hopefully, leading the way toward the steps to the entrance hall.

.137

And then Harry heard it.

". . . rip . . . tear . . . kill . . ."

It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart's office.

He stumbled to a halt, clutching at the stone wall, listening with all his

might, looking around, squinting up and down the dimly lit passageway.

"Harry, what're you -?"

"It's that voice again - shut up a minute -"

". . . soo hungry . . . for so long . . ."

"Listen!" said Harry urgently, and Ron and Hermione froze, watching him.

". . . kill . . . time to kill . . ."

The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away - moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling; how could it be moving upward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn't matter?

"This way," he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, into the entrance hall. It was no good hoping to hear anything here, the babble of talk from the Halloween feast was echoing out of the Great Hall. Harry sprinted up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.

"Harry, what're we -"

"SHH!"

.138

Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: ". . . I smell blood. . . . I SMELL BLOOD!"

His stomach lurched -

"It's going to kill someone!" he shouted, and ignoring Ron's and Hermione's bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps -

Harry hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

"Harry, what was that all about?" said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. "I couldn't hear anything. . . ."

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

"Look!"

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches. the chamber of secrets has been opened. enemies of the heir, beware.

"What's that thing - hanging underneath?" said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped - there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash..Mrs. Norris,

the caretaker's cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring. For a few seconds, they didn't move. Then Ron said, "Let's get out of here." "Shouldn't we try and help -" Harry began awkwardly. "Trust me," said Ron. "We don't want to be found here." But it was too late. A rumble, as though of distant thunder, told them that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor where they stood came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people; next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends. The chatter, the bustle, the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood alone, in the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight. Then someone shouted through the quiet. "Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!" It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

What's going on here? What's going on?" Attracted no doubt by Malfoy's shout, Argus Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry.

"You!" he screeched. "You! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll -"

"Argus!"

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other

teachers. In seconds, he had swept past Harry, Ron, and Hermione and detached Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket.

"Come with me, Argus," he said to Filch. "You, too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

140

"My office is nearest, Headmaster - just upstairs - please feel free -"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

As they entered Lockhart's darkened office there was a flurry of movement across the walls; Harry saw several of the Lockharts in the pictures dodging out of sight, their hair in rollers. The real Lockhart lit the candles on his desk and stood back. Dumbledore lay Mrs. Norris on the polished surface and began to examine her. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged tense looks and sank into chairs outside the pool of candlelight, watching.

The tip of Dumbledore's long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs. Norris's fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most peculiar expression: It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. And Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making suggestions.

"It was definitely a curse that killed her - probably the Transmogrification Torture - I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her"

Lockhart's comments were punctuated by Filch's dry, racking sobs. He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris,

his face in his hands. Much as he detested Filch, Harry

141

couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him, though not nearly as sorry as he felt for himself. If Dumbledore believed Filch, he would be expelled for sure.

Dumbledore was now muttering strange words under his breath and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand but nothing happened: She continued to look as though she had been recently stuffed.

". . . I remember something very similar happening in Ouagadougou," said Lockhart, "a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once

The photographs of Lockhart on the walls were all nodding in agreement as he talked. One of them had forgotten to remove his hair net.

At last Dumbledore straightened up.

"She's not dead, Argus," he said softly.

Lockhart stopped abruptly in the middle of counting the number of murders he had prevented.

"Not dead?" choked Filch, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. "But why's she all - all stiff and frozen?"

"She has been Petrified," said Dumbledore ("Ah! I thought so!" said Lockhart). "But how, I cannot say"

"Ask him!" shrieked Filch, turning his blotched and tearstained face to Harry.

"No second year could have done this," said Dumbledore firmly. "it would take Dark Magic of the most advanced -"

"He did it, he did it!" Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. "You saw what he wrote on the wall! He found - in my office - he knows I'm a -"

I'm a -" Filch's face worked horribly. "He knows I'm a Squib!" he finished.

142

"I never touched Mrs. Norris!" Harry said loudly, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, including all the Lockharts on the walls. "And I don't even know what a Squib is."

"Rubbish!" snarled Filch. "He saw my Kwikspell letter!"

"If I might speak, Headmaster," said Snape from the shadows, and Harry's sense of forboding increased; he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good.

"Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said, a slight sneer curling his mouth as though he doubted it. "But we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an explanation about the deathday party. ". . . there were hundreds of ghosts, theyll tell you we were there -"

"But why not join the feast afterward?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Why go up to that corridor?"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

"Because - because -" Harry said, his heart thumping very fast; something told him it would sound very far-fetched if he told them he had been led there by a bodiless voice no one but he could hear, "because we were tired and wanted to go to bed," he said.

"Without any supper?" said Snape, a triumphant smile flickering across his gaunt face. "I didn't think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties."

"We weren't hungry," said Ron loudly as his stomach gave a huge rumble.

Snape's nasty smile widened.

143

"I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truthful," he said. "It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest."

"Really, Severus," said Professor McGonagall sharply, "I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look. His twinkling light-blue gaze made Harry feel as though he were being X-rayed.

"Innocent until proven guilty, Severus," he said firmly.

Snape looked furious. So did Filch.

"My cat has been Petrified!" he shrieked, his eyes popping. "I want to see some punishment!"

"We will be able to cure her, Argus," said Dumbledore patiently. "Professor Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made that will revive Mrs. Norris."

"I'll make it," Lockhart butted in. "I must have done it a hundred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep -"

"Excuse me," said Snape icily. "But I believe I am the Potions master at this school."

There was a very awkward pause.

"You may go," Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

They went, as quickly as they could without actually running. When they were a floor up from Lockhart's office, they turned into

144

an empty classroom and closed the door quietly behind them. Harry squinted at his friends' darkened faces.

"D'you think I should have told them about that voice I heard?"

"No," said Ron, without hesitation. "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world."

Something in Ron's voice made Harry ask, "You do believe me, don't you?"

"Course I do," said Ron quickly. "But -you must admit it's weird

"I know it's weird," said Harry. "The whole thing's weird. What was that writing on the wall about? The Chamber Has Been Opened... What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, it rings a sort of bell," said Ron slowly. "I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts once ... might've been Bill"

"And what on earth's a Squib?" said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

"Well - it's not funny really - but as it's Filch, he said. "A Squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but Squibs are quite unusual. If Filch's trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much." Ron gave a satisfied smile. "He's bitter."

A clock chimed somewhere.

"Midnight," said Harry. "We'd better get to bed before Snape comes along and tries to frame us for something else."

145

For a few days, the school could talk of little else but the attack on Mrs. Norris. Filch kept it fresh in everyone's minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back. Harry had seen him scrubbing the message on the wall with Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, but to no effect; the words still gleamed as brightly as ever on the stone. When Filch wasn't guarding the scene of the crime, he was skulking red-eyed through the corridors, lunging out at unsuspecting students and trying to put them in detention for things like "breathing loudly" and "looking happy."

Ginny Weasley seemed very disturbed by Mrs. Norris's fate. According to Ron, she was a great cat lover.

"But you haven't really got to know Mrs. Norris," Ron told her bracingly. "Honestly, we're much better off without her." Ginny's lip trembled. "Stuff like this doesn't often happen at Hogwarts," Ron assured her. "They'll catch the maniac who did it and have him out of here in no time. I just hope he's got time to Petrify Filch before he's expelled. I'm only joking -" Ron added hastily as Ginny blanched.

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much response from her when they asked what she was up to, and not until the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been held back in Potions, where Snape had made him stay behind to scrape tubeworms off the desks. After a hurried lunch, he went upstairs to meet Ron in the library, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuff boy from Herbology, coming

146

toward him. Harry had just opened his mouth to say hello when Justin caught sight of him, turned abruptly, and sped off in the opposite direction.

Harry found Ron at the back of the library, measuring his History of

Magic homework. Professor Binns had asked for a threefoot-long composition on "The Medieval Assembly of European

Wizards."

"I don't believe it, I'm still eight inches short" said Ron fu

riously, letting go of his parchment, which sprang back into a roll.

"And Hermione's done four feet seven inches and her writing's tiny."

"Where is she?" asked Harry, grabbing the tape measure and unrolling his own homework.

"Somewhere over there," said Ron, pointing along the shelves. "Looking for another book. I think she's trying to read the whole library before Christmas."

Harry told Ron about Justin Finch-Fletchley running away from him.

"Dunno why you care. I thought he was a bit of an idiot," said Ron, scribbling away, making his writing as large as possible. "All that junk about Lockhart being so great -"

Hermione emerged from between the bookshelves. She looked irritable and at last seemed ready to talk to them.

"All the copies of Hogwarts, A History have been taken out," she said, sitting down next to Harry and Ron. "And there's a two-week waiting list. I wish I hadn't left my copy at home, but I couldn't fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books."

"Why do you want it?" said Harry.

141

"The same reason everyone else wants it," said Hermione, "to read up on the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

"What's that?" said Harry quickly.

"That's just it. I can't remember," said Hermione, biting her lip. "And I can't find the story anywhere else -"

"Hermione, let me read your composition," said Ron desperately, checking his watch.

"No, I won't," said Hermione, suddenly severe. "You've had ten days to finish it -"

"I only need another two inches, come on -"

The bell rang. Ron and Hermione led the way to History of Magic, bickering.

History of Magic was the dullest subject on their schedule. Professor Binns, who taught it, was their only ghost teacher, and the most exciting thing that ever happened in his classes was his entering the room through the blackboard. Ancient and shriveled, many people said he hadn't noticed he was dead. He had simply got up to teach one day and left his body behind him in an armchair in front of the staff room fire; his routine had not varied in the slightest since.

Today was as boring as ever. Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again. He had been speaking for half an hour when something happened that had never happened before. Hermione put up her hand.

Professor Binns, glancing up in the middle of a deadly dull lec

148

ture on the International Warlock Convention of 1289, looked amazed.

"Miss - er -?"

"Granger, Professor. I was wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets," said Hermione in a clear voice.

Dean Thomas, who had been sitting with his mouth hanging open, gazing out of the window, jerked out of his trance; Lavender Brown's head came up off her arms and Neville Longbottom's elbow slipped off his desk.

Professor Binns blinked.

"My subject is History of Magic," he said in his dry, wheezy voice. "I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends." He cleared his throat with a small noise like chalk s!-ping and continued, "In September of that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorcerers

"

He stuttered to a halt. Hermione's hand was waving in the air again.

"Miss Grant?"

"Please, sir, don't legends always have a basis in fact?"

Professor Binns was looking at her in such amazement, Harry was sure no student had ever interrupted him before, alive or dead.

"Well," said Professor Binns slowly, "yes, one could argue that, I suppose." He peered at Hermione as though he had never seen a student properly before. "However, the legend of which you speak is such a very sensational, even ludicrous tale -"

But the whole class was now hanging on Professor Binns's every word. He looked dimly at them all, every face turned to his. Harry

149

could tell he was completely thrown by such an unusual show of interest.

"Oh, very well," he said slowly. "Let me see ... the Chamber of Secrets ...

"You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago - the precise date is uncertain - by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution."

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued.

"For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more selective about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school."

Professor Binns paused again, pursing his lips, looking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

"Reliable historical sources tell us this much," he said. "But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a

150

hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

"Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn't the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns's classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed.

"The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course," he said. "Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible."

Hermione's hand was back in the air.

"Sir - what exactly do you mean by the 'horror within' the Chamber?"

"That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control," said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks.

"I tell you, the thing does not exist," said Professor Binns, shuffling his notes. "There is no Chamber and no monster."

"But, sir," said Seamus Finnigan, "if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin's true heir, no one else would be able to find it, would they?"

"Nonsense, O'Flaherty," said Professor Binns in an aggravated

151

tone. "If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses haven't found the thing -"

"But, Professor," piped up Parvati Patil, "you'd probably have to use Dark Magic to open it -"

"Just because a wizard doesn't use Dark Magic doesn't mean he can't, Miss Pennyfeather," snapped Professor Binns. "I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore -"

"But maybe you've got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumbledore couldn't -" began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

"That will do," he said sharply. "It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to history, to solid, believable, verifiable fact!"

And within five minutes, the class had sunk back into its usual torpor.

"I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony," Ron told Harry and Hermione as they fought their way through the teeming corridors at the end of the lesson to drop off their bags before dinner. "But I never knew he started all this pure-blood stuff. I wouldn't be in his house if you paid me. Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I'd've got the train straight back home

Hermione nodded fervently, but Harry didn't say anything. His stomach had just dropped unpleasantly.

Harry had never told Ron and Hermione that the Sorting Hat

152

had seriously considered putting him in Slytherin. He could remember, as though it were yesterday, the small voice that had spoken in his ear when he'd placed the hat on his head a year before: You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that...

But Harry, who had already heard of Slytherin House's reputa

tion for turning out Dark wizards, had thought desperately, Not Slytherin! and the hat had said, Oh, well, if you're sure ... better be Gryffindor...

As they were shunted along in the throng, Colin Creevy went past.

"Hiya, Harry!"

"Hullo, Colin," said Harry automatically.

"Harry - Harry - a boy in my class has been saying you're

But Colin was so small he couldn't fight against the tide of people bearing him toward the Great Hall; they heard him squeak, "See you, Harry!" and he was gone.

"What's a boy in his class saying about you?" Hermione wondered.

"That I'm Slytherin's heir, I expect," said Harry, his stomach dropping another inch or so as he suddenly remembered the way Justin Finch-Fletchley had run away from him at lunchtime.

"People here'll believe anything," said Ron in disgust.

The crowd thinned and they were able to climb the next staircase without difficulty.

"D'you really think there's a Chamber of Secrets?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I don't know," she said, frowning. "Dumbledore couldn't cure

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Mrs. Norris, and that makes me think that whatever attacked her might not be - well - human."

As she spoke, they turned a corner and found themselves at the end of the very corridor where the attack had happened. They stopped and looked. The scene was just as it had been that night, except that there was no stiff cat hanging from the torch bracket, and an empty chair stood against the wall bearing the message "The Chamber of Secrets has been Opened."

"That's where Filch has been keeping guard," Ron muttered.

They looked at each other. The corridor was deserted.

"Can't hurt to have a poke around," said Harry, dropping his bag and getting to his hands and knees so that he could crawl along, searching for clues.

"Scorch marks!" he said. "Here - and here -"

"Come and look at this!" said Hermione. "This is funny"

Harry got up and crossed to the window next to the message on the wall. Hermione was pointing at the topmost pane, where around twenty spiders were scuttling, apparently fighting to get through a

small crack. A long, silvery thread was dangling like a rope, as though they had all climbed it in their hurry to get outside.

"Have you ever seen spiders act like that?" said Hermione wonderingly.

"No," said Harry, "have you, Ron? Ron?"

He looked over his shoulder. Ron was standing well back and seemed to be fighting the impulse to run.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"I - don't - like - spiders," said Ron tensely.

"I never knew that," said Hermione, looking at Ron in surprise.
"You've used spiders in Potions loads of times

154

"I don't mind them dead," said Ron, who was carefully looking anywhere but at the window. "I just don't like the way they move

Hermione giggled.

"It's not funny," said Ron, fiercely. "If you must know, when I was three, Fred turned my - my teddy bear into a great big filthy spider because I broke his toy broomstick You wouldn't like them either if you'd been holding your bear and suddenly it had too many legs and . . ."

He broke off, shuddering. Hermione was obviously still trying not to laugh. Feeling they had better get off the subject, Harry said, "Remember all that water on the floor? Where did that come from? Someone's mopped it up."

"It was about here," said Ron, recovering himself to walk a few paces past Filch's chair and pointing. "Level with this door."

He reached for the brass doorknob but suddenly withdrew his hand as though he'd been burned.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"Can't go in there," said Ron gruffly. "That's a girls' toilet."

"Oh, Ron, there won't be anyone in there," said Hermione, standing up and coming over. "That's Moaning Myrtle's place. Come on, let's have a look."

And ignoring the large OUT of ORDER sign, she opened the door.

It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom Harry had ever set foot in. Under a large, cracked, and spotted mirror were a row of chipped sinks. The floor was damp and reflected the dull light given off by the stubs of a few candles, burning low in their holders; the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and scratched and one of them was dangling off its hinges.

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Hermione put her fingers to her lips and set off toward the end stall. When she reached it she said, "Hello, Myrtle, how are you?"

Harry and Ron went to look. Moaning Myrtle was floating above the tank of the toilet, picking a spot on her chin.

"This is a girls' bathroom," she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously. "They're not girls."

"No," Hermione agreed. "I just wanted to show them how er - nice it is in here."

She waved vaguely at the dirty old mirror and the damp floor.

"Ask her if she saw anything," Harry mouthed at Hermione.

"What are you whispering?" said Myrtle, staring at him.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly. "We wanted to ask -"

"I wish people would stop talking behind my back!" said Myrtle, in a voice choked with tears. "I do have feelings, you know, even if I am dead -"

"Myrtle, no one wants to upset you," said Hermione. "Harry only -"

"No one wants to upset me! That's a good one!" howled Myrtle. "My life was nothing but misery at this place and now people come along ruining my death!"

"We wanted to ask you if you've seen anything funny lately," said Hermione quickly. "Because a cat was attacked right outside your front door on Halloween."

"Did you see anyone near here that night?" said Harry.

"I wasn't paying attention," said Myrtle dramatically. "Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to kill myself. Then, of course, I remembered that I'm - that I'm "

"Already dead," said Ron helpfully.

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Myrtle gave a tragic sob, rose up in the air, turned over, and dived headfirst into the toilet, splashing water all over them and vanishing from sight, although from the direction of her muffled sobs, she had come to rest somewhere in the U-bend.

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths open, but Hermione shrugged wearily and said, "Honestly, that was almost cheerful for Myrtle Come on, let's go."

Harry had barely closed the door on Myrtle's gurgling sobs when a loud voice made all three of them jump.

"RON!"

Percy Weasley had stopped dead at the head of the stairs, prefect badge agleam, an expression of complete shock on his face.

"That's a girls' bathroom!" he gasped. "What were you -?"

"Just having a look around," Ron shrugged. "Clues, you know -"

Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

"Get - away - from - there -" Perry said, striding toward them and starting to bustle them along, flapping his arms. "Don't you care what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone's at dinner -"

"Why shouldn't we be here?" said Ron hotly, stopping short and glaring at Percy. "Listen, we never laid a finger on that cat!"

"That's what I told Ginny," said Percy fiercely, "but she still seems to think you're going to be expelled, I've never seen her so upset, crying her eyes out, you might think of her, all the first years are thoroughly overexcited by this business -"

"You don't care about Ginny," said Ron, whose ears were now

157

reddening. "You're just worried I'm going to mess up your chances of being Head Boy -"

"Five points from Gryffindor!" Percy said tersely, fingering his prefect badge. "And I hope it teaches you a lesson! No more detective work, or I'll write to Mum!"

And he strode off, the back of his neck as red as Ron's ears.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose seats as far as possible from Percy in the common room that night. Ron was still in a very bad temper and kept blotting his Charms homework. When he reached absently for his wand to remove the smudges, it ignited the parchment. Fuming almost as much as his homework, Ron slammed The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 shut. To Harry's surprise, Hermione followed suit.

"Who can it be, though?" she said in a quiet voice, as though continuing a conversation they had just been having. "Who'd want to frighten all the Squibs and Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?"

"Let's think," said Ron in mock puzzlement. "Who do we know who thinks Muggle-borns are scum?"

He looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back, unconvinced.

"If you're talking about Malfoy -"

"Of course I am!" said Ron. "You heard him - `You'll be next, Mudbloods!'- come on, you've only got to look at his foul rat face to know it's him -"

"Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Look at his family," said Harry, closing his books, too. "The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin; he's always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin's descendants. His father's definitely evil enough."

158

"They couldve had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries!" said Ron. "Handing it down, father to son

"Well," said Hermione cautiously, "I suppose it's possible

"But how do we prove it?" said Harry darkly.

"There might be a way," said Hermione slowly, dropping her voice still further with a quick glance across the room at Percy. "Of course, it would be difficult. And dangerous, very dangerous. We'd be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect -"

"If, in a month or so, you feel like explaining, you will let us know, won't you?" said Ron irritably.

"All right," said Hermione coldly. "What we'd need to do is to get inside the Slytherin common room and ask Malfoy a few questions without him realizing it's us."

"But that's impossible," Harry said as Ron laughed.

"No, it's not," said Hermione. "All we'd need would be some Polyjuice Potion."

"What's that?" said Ron and Harry together.

"Snape mentioned it in class a few weeks ago -"

"D'you think we've got nothing better to do in Potions than listen to Snape?" muttered Ron.

"It transforms you into somebody else. Think about it! We could change into three of the Slytherins. No one would know it was us. Malfoy would probably tell us anything. He's probably boasting about it in the Slytherin common room right now, if only we could hear him."

"This Polyjuice stuff sounds a bit dodgy to me," said Ron, frowning. "What if we were stuck looking like three of the Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after a while," said Hermione, waving her hand

159

impatiently. "But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called *Moste Potente Potions* and it's bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library."

There was only one way to get out a book from the Restricted Section: You needed a signed note of permission from a teacher.

"Hard to see why we'd want the book, really," said Ron, "if we weren't going to try and make one of the potions."

"I think," said Hermione, "that if we made it sound as though we were just interested in the theory, we might stand a chance

"Oh, come on, no teacher's going to fall for that," said Ron.

"They'd have to be really thick"

CHAPTER TEN

THE ROGUE BLUDGER

ince the disastrous episode of the pixies, Professor Lockhart had not brought live creatures to class. Instead, he read passages from his books to them, and sometimes reenacted some of the more dramatic bits. He usually picked Harry to help him with these reconstructions; so far, Harry had been forced to play a simple Transylvanian villager whom Lockhart had cured of a Babbling Curse, a yeti with a head cold, and a vampire who had been unable to eat anything except lettuce since Lockhart had dealt with him.

Harry was hauled to the front of the class during their very next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, this time acting a werewolf. If he hadn't had a very good reason for keeping Lockhart in a good mood, he would have refused to do it.

"Nice loud howl, Harry - exactly - and then, if you'll believe it, I pounced - like this - slammed him to the floor - thus with one hand, I managed to hold him down - with my other, I

161

put my wand to his throat - I then screwed up my remaining strength and performed the immensely complex Homorphus Charm - he let out a piteous moan - go on, Harry - higher than that - good - the fur vanished - the fangs shrank - and he turned back into a man. Simple, yet effective - and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks."

The bell rang and Lockhart got to his feet.

"Homework - compose a poem about my defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf! Signed copies of Magical Me to the author of the best one!"

The class began to leave. Harry returned to the back of the room, where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

"Ready?" Harry muttered.

"Wait till everyone's gone," said Hermione nervously. "All right . . ."

She approached Lockhart's desk, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, Harry and Ron right behind her.

"Er - Professor Lockhart?" Hermione stammered. "I wanted to - to get this book out of the library. Just for background reading." She held out the piece of paper, her hand shaking slightly. "But the thing is, it's in the Restricted Section of the library, so I need a teacher to

sign for it - I'm sure it would help me understand what you say in Gadding with Ghouls about slow-acting venoms

"Ah, Gadding with Ghouls!" said Lockhart, taking the note from Hermione and smiling widely at her. "Possibly my very favorite book. You enjoyed it?"

-162

"Oh, yes," said Hermione eagerly. "So clever, the way you trapped that last one with the tea-strainer -"

"Well, I'm sure no one will mind me giving the best student of the year a little extra help," said Lockhart warmly, and he pulled out an enormous peacock quill. "Yes, nice, isn't it?" he said, misreading the revolted look on Ron's face. "I usually save it for book-signings."

He scrawled an enormous loopy signature on the note and handed it back to Hermione.

"So, Harry," said Lockhart, while Hermione folded the note with fumbling fingers and slipped it into her bag. "Tomorrow's the first Quidditch match of the season, I believe? Gryffindor against Slytherin, is it not? I hear you're a useful player. I was a Seeker, too. I was asked to try for the National Squad, but preferred to dedicate my life to the eradication of the Dark Forces. Still, if ever you feel the need for a little private training, don't hesitate to ask. Always happy to pass on my expertise to less able players

Harry made an indistinct noise in his throat and then hurried off after Ron and Hermione.

"I don't believe it," he said as the three of them examined the signature on the note. "He didn't even look at the book we wanted."

"That's because he's a brainless git," said Ron. "But who cares, we've got what we needed -"

"He is not a brainless git," said Hermione shrilly as they half ran toward the library.

"Just because he said you were the best student of the year -"

They dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of the library. Madam Pince, the librarian, was a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture.

163

"Moste Potente Potions?" she repeated suspiciously, trying to take the note from Hermione; but Hermione wouldn't let go.

"I was wondering if I could keep it," she said breathlessly.

"Oh, come on," said Ron, wrenching it from her grasp and thrusting it at Madam Pince. "We'll get you another autograph. Lockhart'll sign anything if it stands still long enough."

Madam Pince held the note up to the light, as though determined to detect a forgery, but it passed the test. She stalked away between the lofty shelves and returned several minutes later carrying a large and moldy-looking book. Hermione put it carefully into her bag and they left, trying not to walk too quickly or look too guilty.

Five minutes later, they were barricaded in Moaning Myrtle's out-of-order bathroom once again. Hermione had overridden Ron's objections by pointing out that it was the last place anyone in their right minds would go, so they were guaranteed some privacy. Moaning Myrtle was crying noisily in her stall, but they were ignoring her, and she them.

Hermione opened Moste Potente Potions carefully, and the three of them bent over the damp-spotted pages. It was clear from a glance why it belonged in the Restricted Section. Some of the potions had effects almost too gruesome to think about, and there were some very unpleasant illustrations, which included a man who seemed to have been turned inside out and a witch sprouting several extra pairs of arms out of her head.

"Here it is," said Hermione excitedly as she found the page headed The Polyjuice Potion. It was decorated with drawings of people halfway through transforming into other people. Harry sin

164

cerely hoped the artist had imagined the looks of intense pain on their faces.

"This is the most complicated potion I've ever seen," said Hermione as they scanned the recipe. "Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass," she murmured, running her finger down the list of ingredients. "Well, they're easy enough, they're in the student store-cupboard, we can help ourselves Oooh, look, powdered horn of a bicorn - don't know where we're going to get that - shredded skin of a boomslang - that'll be tricky, too and of course a bit of whoever we want to change into."

"Excuse me?" said Ron sharply. "What d'you mean, a bit of whoever we're changing into? I'm drinking nothing with Crabbe's toenails in it -"

Hermione continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"We don't have to worry about that yet, though, because we add those bits last

Ron turned, speechless, to Harry, who had another worry.

"D'you realize how much we're going to have to steal, Hermione? Shredded skin of a boomslang, that's definitely not in the students' cupboard. What're we going to do, break into Snape's private stores? I don't know if this is a good idea

Hermione shut the book with a snap.

"Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine," she said. There were bright pink patches on her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than usual. "I don't want to break rules, you know. I think threatening Muggle-borns is far worse than brewing up a difficult potion. But if you don't want to find out if it's Malfoy, I'll go straight to Madam Pince now and hand the book back in ='

*165

"I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be persuading us to break rules," said Ron. "All right, we'll do it. But not toenails, okay?"

"How long will it take to make, anyway?" said Harry as Hermione, looking happier, opened the book again.

"Well, since the fluxweed has got to be picked at the full moon and the lacewings have got to be stewed for twenty-one days ... I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients."

"A month?" said Ron. "Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!" But Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously again, and he added swiftly, "But it's the best plan we've got, so full steam ahead, I say."

However, while Hermione was checking that the coast was clear for them to leave the bathroom, Ron muttered to Harry, "It'll be a lot less hassle if you can just knock Malfoy off his broom tomorrow."

Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day

166

with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurrying over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point denying it. But we've got better people on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers -" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been properly dry since August") "- and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry.

"It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry" said Fred, winking at him.

As they walked out onto the pitch, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three ... two ... one. . .

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch.

167

"All right there, Scarhead?" yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Harry had no time to reply. At that very moment, a heavy black Bludger came pelting toward him; he avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

"Close one, Harry!" said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back toward a Slytherin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in midair and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Malfoy. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry's head.

Harry put on a burst of speed and zoomed toward the other end of the

pitch. He could hear the Bludger whistling along behind him. What was going on? Bludgers never concentrated on one player like this; it was their job to try and unseat as many people as possible

Fred Weasley was waiting for the Bludger at the other end. Harry ducked as Fred swung at the Bludger with all his might; the Bludger was knocked off course.

"Gotcha!" Fred yelled happily, but he was wrong; as though it was magnetically attracted to Harry, the Bludger pelted after him once more and Harry was forced to fly off at full speed.

It had started to rain; Harry felt heavy drops fall onto his face, splattering onto his glasses. He didn't have a clue what was going on in the rest of the game until he heard Lee Jordan, who was commentating, say, "Slytherin lead, sixty points to zero ="

168

The Slytherins' superior brooms were clearly doing their jobs, and meanwhile the mad Bludger was doing all it could to knock Harry out of the air. Fred and George were now flying so close to him on either side that Harry could see nothing at all except their flailing arms and had no chance to look for the Snitch, let alone catch it.

"Someone's - tampered - with - this - Bludger -" Fred grunted, swinging his bat with all his might at it as it launched a new attack on Harry.

"We need time out," said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry's nose at the same time.

Wood had obviously got the message. Madam Hooch's whistle rang out and Harry, Fred, and George dived for the ground, still trying to avoid the mad Bludger.

"What's going on?" said Wood as the Gryffindor team huddled together, while Slytherins in the crowd jeered. "We're being flattened. Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina scoring?"

"We were twenty feet above her, stopping the other Bludger from

murdering Harry, Oliver," said George angrily. "Someone's fixed it - it won't leave Harry alone. It hasn't gone for anyone else all game. The Slytherins must have done something to it."

"But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch's office since our last practice, and there was nothing wrong with them then" said Wood, anxiously.

Madam Hooch was walking toward them. Over her shoulder, Harry could see the Slytherin team jeering and pointing in his direction.

169

"Listen," said Harry as she came nearer and nearer, "with you two flying around me all the time the only way I'm going to catch the Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. Go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one."

"Don't be thick," said Fred. "It'll take your head off."

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

(I Oliver, this is insane," said Alicia Spinner angrily. "You can't let Harry deal with that thing on his own. Let's ask for an inquiry -))

"If we stop now, we'll have to forfeit the match!" said Harry. "And we're not losing to Slytherin just because of a crazy Bludger! Come on, Oliver, tell them to leave me alone!"

"This is all your fault," George said angrily to Wood. " 'Get the Snitch or die trying,' what a stupid thing to tell him -"

Madam Hooch had joined them.

"Ready to resume play?" she asked Wood.

Wood looked at the determined look on Harry's face.

"All right," he said. "Fred, George, you heard Harry -leave him alone and let him deal with the Bludger on his own."

The rain was falling more heavily now. On Madam Hooch's whistle,

Harry kicked hard into the air and heard the telltale whoosh of the Bludger behind him. Higher and higher Harry climbed; he looped and swooped, spiraled, zigzagged, and rolled. Slightly dizzy, he nevertheless kept his eyes wide open, rain was speckling his glasses and ran up his nostrils as he hung upside down, avoiding another fierce dive from the Bludger. He could hear laughter from the crowd; he knew he must look very stupid, but the rogue Bludger was heavy and couldn't change direction as quickly as Harry could; he began a kind of roller-coaster ride around the

170

edges of the stadium, squinting through the silver sheets of rain to the Gryffindor goal posts, where Adrian Pucey was trying to get past Wood

A whistling in Harry's ear told him the Bludger had just missed him again; he turned right over and sped in the opposite direction.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" yelled Malfoy as Harry was forced to do a stupid kind of twirl in midair to dodge the Bludger, and he fled, the Bludger trailing a few feet behind him; and then, glaring back at Malfoy in hatred, he saw it - the Golden Snitch. It was hovering inches above Malfoy's left ear - and Malfoy, busy laughing at Harry, hadn't seen it.

For an agonizing moment, Harry hung in midair, not daring to speed toward Malfoy in case he looked up and saw the Snitch.

WHAM.

He had stayed still a second too long. The Bludger had hit him at last, smashed into his elbow, and Harry felt his arm break. Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, he slid sideways on his rain-drenched broom, one knee still crooked over it, his right arm dangling useless at his side - the Bludger came pelting back for a second attack, this time W-ming at his face - Harry swerved out of the way, one idea firmly lodged in his numb brain: get to Malfoy.

Through a haze of rain and pain he dived for the shimmering, sneering face below him and saw its eyes widen with fear: Malfoy thought Harry was attacking him.

"What the -" he gasped, careening out of Harry's way.

Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild snatch; he felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only

171

gripping the broom with his legs, and there was a yell from the crowd below as he headed straight for the ground, trying hard not to pass out.

With a splattering thud he hit the mud and rolled off his broom. His arm was hanging at a very strange angle; riddled with pain, he heard, as though from a distance, a good deal of whistling and shouting. He focused on the Snitch clutched in his good hand.

"Aha," he said vaguely. "We've won."

And he fainted.

He came around, rain falling on his face, still lying on the field, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth.

"Oh, no, not you," he moaned.

"Doesn't know what he's saying," said Lockhart loudly to the anxious crowd of Gryffindors pressing around them. "Not to worry, Harry. I'm about to fix your arm."

"No!" said Harry. "I'll keep it like this, thanks

He tried to sit up, but the pain was terrible. He heard a familiar clicking noise nearby.

"I don't want a photo of this, Colin," he said loudly.

"Lie back, Harry," said Lockhart soothingly. "It's a simple charm I've used countless times -"

"Why can't I just go to the hospital wing?" said Harry through clenched teeth.

"He should really, Professor," said a muddy Wood, who couldn't help grinning even though his Seeker was injured. "Great capture, Harry, really spectacular, your best yet, I'd say -"

Through the thicket of legs around him, Harry spotted Fred and

112

George Weasley, wrestling the rogue Bludger into a box. It was still putting up a terrific fight.

"Stand back," said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

"No - don't -" said Harry weakly, but Lockhart was twirling his wand and a second later had directed it straight at Harry's arm.

A strange and unpleasant sensation started at Harry's shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated. He didn't dare look at what was happening. He had shut his eyes, his face turned away from his arm, but his worst fears were realized as the people above him gasped and Colin Creevey began clicking away madly. His arm didn't hurt anymore - nor did it feel remotely like an arm.

"Ah," said Lockhart. "Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That's the thing to bear in mind. So, Harry, just toddle up to the hospital wing - ah, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, would you escort him? - and Madam Pomfrey will be able to - er - tidy you up a bit."

As Harry got to his feet, he felt strangely lopsided. Taking a deep breath he looked down at his right side. What he saw nearly made him pass out again.

Poking out of the end of his robes was what looked like a thick, flesh-colored rubber glove. He tried to move his fingers. Nothing happened.

Lockhart hadn't mended Harry's bones. He had removed them.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't at all pleased.

"You should have come straight to me!" she raged, holding up

173

the sad, limp remainder of what, half an hour before, had been a working arm. "I can mend bones in a second - but growing them back -"

"You will be able to, won't you?" said Harry desperately.

"I'll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful," said Madam Pomfrey grimly, throwing Harry a pair of pajamas. "You'll have to stay the night

Hermione waited outside the curtain drawn around Harry's bed while Ron helped him into his pajamas. It took a while to stuff the rubbery, boneless arm into a sleeve.

"How can you stick up for Lockhart now, Hermione, eh?" Ron called through the curtain as he pulled Harry's limp fingers through the cuff. "If Harry had wanted deboning he would have asked."

"Anyone can make a mistake," said Hermione. "And it doesn't hurt anymore, does it, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, getting into bed. "But it doesn't do anything else either."

As he swung himself onto the bed, his arm flapped pointlessly.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labeled Skele-Gro.

"You're in for a rough night," she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. "Regrowing bones is a nasty business.

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry's mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. Still tut-tutting about dangerous sports and inept teachers, Madam Pomfrey re

114

treated, leaving Ron and Hermione to help Harry gulp down some water.

"We won, though," said Ron, a grin breaking across his face.

"That was some catch you made. Malfoy's face ... he looked ready to kill

"I want to know how he fixed that Bludger," said Hermione darkly.

"We can add that to the list of questions we'll ask him when we've taken the Polyjuice Potion," said Harry, sinking back onto his pillows. "I hope it tastes better than this stuff

"If it's got bits of Slytherins in it? You've got to be joking," said Ron.

The door of the hospital wing burst open at that moment. Filthy and soaking wet, the rest of the Gryffindor team had arrived to see Harry.

"Unbelievable flying, Harry," said George. "I've just seen Marcus Flint yelling at Malfoy. Something about having the Snitch on top of his head and not noticing. Malfoy didn't seem too happy." They had brought cakes, sweets, and bottles of pumpkin juice; they gathered around Harry's bed and were just getting started on what promised to be a good party when Madam Pomfrey came storming over, shouting, "This boy needs rest, he's got thirty-three bones to regrow! Out! OUT!"

And Harry was left alone, with nothing to distract him from the stabbing pains in his limp arm.

Hours and hours later, Harry woke quite suddenly in the pitch blackness and gave a small yelp of pain: His arm now felt full of

large splinters. For a second, he thought that was what had woken him. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that someone was sponging his forehead in the dark.

"Get off!" he said loudly, and then, "Dobby!"

The house-elf's goggling tennis ball eyes were peering at Harry through the darkness. A single tear was running down his long, pointed nose.

"Harry Potter came back to school," he whispered miserably.

"Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn't you heed Dobby? Why didn't Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?"

Harry heaved himself up on his pillows and pushed Dobby's sponge away.

"What're you doing here?" he said. "And how did you know I missed the train?"

Dobby's lip trembled and Harry was seized by a sudden suspicion.

"It was you!" he said slowly. "You stopped the barrier from letting us through!"

"Indeed yes, sir," said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward" - he showed Harry ten long, bandaged fingers - "but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and never did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!"

He was rocking backward and forward, shaking his ugly head.

"Dobby was 'so shocked when he heard Harry Potter was back at Hogwarts, he let his master's dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir

176

Harry slumped back onto his pillows.

"You nearly got Ron and me expelled," he said fiercely. "You'd better get lost before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you."

Dobby smiled weakly.

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home."

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

"Why d'you wear that thing, Dobby?" he asked curiously.

"This, sir?" said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. "'Tis a mark of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever."

Dobby mopped his bulging eyes and said suddenly, "Harry Potter must go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make -"

"Your Bludger?" said Harry, anger rising once more. "What d'you mean, your Bludger? You made that Bludger try and kill me?"

"Not kill you, sir, never kill you!" said Dobby, shocked. "Dobby wants to save Harry Potter's life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!"

"Oh, is that all?" said Harry angrily. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you wanted me sent home in pieces?"

"Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!" Dobby groaned, more tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. "If he knew what he means

177

to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir," he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. "But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sit... And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more

Dobby froze, horrorstruck, then grabbed Harry's water jug from his

bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, "Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby. . ."

"So there is a Chamber of Secrets?" Harry whispered. "And did you say it's been opened before? Tell me, Dobby!"

He seized the elf's bony wrist as Dobby's hand inched toward the water jug. "But I'm not Muggle-born - how can I be in danger from the Chamber?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen - go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous -"

"Who is it, Dobby?" Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby's

178

wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. "Who's opened it? Who opened it last time?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf. "Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" said Harry fiercely. "One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she'll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened -"

"Harry Potter risks his own life for his friends!" moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. "So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not -"

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

"Dobby must go!" breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry's fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospital wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

Next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry's bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

179

"Another attack," said Dumbledore. "Minerva found him on the stairs.

"There was a bunch of grapes next to him," said Professor McGonagall. "We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter."

Harry's stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face.

It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

"Petrified?" whispered Madam Pomfrey.

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "But I shudder to think ... If Albus hadn't been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate - who knows what might have -"

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin's rigid grip.

"You don't think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?" said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn't answer. He opened the back of the camera.

"Good gracious!" said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted..."

"What does this mean, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore, "that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

180

"But, Albus ... surely ... who?"

"The question is not who," said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin.

"The question is, how"

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall's shadowy face, she didn't understand this any better than he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DUELING CLUB

Harry woke up on Sunday morning to find the dormitory blazing with winter sunlight and his arm reboned but very stiff. He sat up quickly and looked over at Colin's bed, but it had been blocked from view by the high curtains Harry had changed behind yesterday. Seeing that he was awake, Madam Pomfrey came bustling over with a breakfast tray and then began bending and stretching his arm and fingers.

"All in order," she said as he clumsily fed himself porridge lefthanded. "When you've finished eating, you may leave."

Harry dressed as quickly as he could and hurried off to Gryffindor Tower, desperate to tell Ron and Hermione about Colin and Dobby,

but they weren't there. Harry left to look for them, wondering where they could have got to and feeling slightly hurt that they weren't interested in whether he had his bones back or not.

182

As Harry passed the library, Percy Weasley strolled out of it, looking in far better spirits than last time they'd met.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said. "Excellent flying yesterday, really excellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup you earned fifty points!"

"You haven't seen Ron or Hermione, have you?" said Harry.

"No, I haven't," said Percy, his smile fading. "I hope Ron's not in another girls' toilet

Harry forced a laugh, watched Percy walk out of sight, and then headed straight for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He couldn't see why Ron and Hermione would be in there again, but after making sure that neither Filch nor any prefects were around, he opened the door and heard their voices coming from a locked stall.

"It's me," he said, closing the door behind him. There was a clunk, a splash, and a gasp from within the stall and he saw Hermione's eye peering through the keyhole.

"Harry!" she said. "You gave us such a fright - come in how's your arm?"

"Fine," said Harry, squeezing into the stall. An old cauldron was perched on the toilet, and a crackling from under the rim told Harry they had lit a fire beneath it. Conjuring up portable, waterproof fires was a speciality of Hermione's.

"We'd've come to meet you, but we decided to get started on the Polyjuice Potion," Ron explained as Harry, with difficulty, locked the stall again. "We've decided this is the safest place to hide it."

Harry started to tell them about Colin, but Hermione interrupted.

"We already know - we heard Professor McGonagall telling

Professor Flitwick this morning. That's why we decided we'd better get going -"

"The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better," snarled Ron. "D'you know what I think? He was in such a foul temper after the Quidditch match, he took it out on Colin."

"There's something else," said Harry, watching Hermione tearing bundles of knotgrass and throwing them into the potion. "Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night."

Ron and Hermione looked up, amazed. Harry told them everything Dobby had told him - or hadn't told him. Hermione and Ron listened with their mouths open.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened before?" Hermione said.

"This settles it," said Ron in a triumphant voice. "Lucius Malfoy must've opened the Chamber when he was at school here and now he's told dear old Draco how to do it. It's obvious. Wish Dobby'd told you what kind of monster's in there, though. I want to know how come nobody's noticed it sneaking around the school."

"Maybe it can make itself invisible," said Hermione, prodding leeches to the bottom of the cauldron. "Or maybe it can disguise itself - pretend to be a suit of armor or something - I've read about Chameleon Ghouls -"

"You read too much, Hermione," said Ron, pouring dead lacewings on top of the leeches. He crumpled up the empty lacewing bag and looked at Harry.

"So Dobby stopped us from getting on the train and broke your

arm He shook his head. "You know what, Harry? If he doesn't

stop trying to save your life he's going to kill you."

184

The news that Colin Creevey had been attacked and was now lying as though dead in the hospital wing had spread through the entire school by Monday morning. The air was suddenly thick with rumor and suspicion. The first years were now moving around the castle in tight-knit groups, as though scared they would be attacked if they ventured forth alone.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Colin Creevey in Charms, was distraught, but Harry felt that Fred and George were going the wrong way about cheering her up. They were taking turns covering themselves with fur or boils and jumping out at her from behind statues. They only stopped when Percy, apoplectic with rage, told them he was going to write to Mrs. Weasley and tell her Ginny was having nightmares.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talismans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom bought a large, evil-smelling green onion, a pointed purple crystal, and a rotting newt tail before the other Gryffindor boys pointed out that he was in no danger; he was a pure-blood, and therefore unlikely to be attacked.

"They went for Filch first," Neville said, his round face fearful. "And everyone knows I'm almost a Squib."

In the second week of December Professor McGonagall came around as usual, collecting names of those who would be staying at school for Christmas. Harry, Ron, and Hermione signed her list; they had heard that Malfoy was staying, which struck them as very suspicious. The holidays would be the perfect time to use the Polyjuice Potion and try to worm a confession out of him.

Unfortunately, the potion was only half finished. They still

* 3-85*

needed the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, and the only place they were going to get them was from Snape's private stores. Harry privately felt he'd rather face Slytherin's legendary monster than let Snape catch him robbing his office.

"What we need," said Hermione briskly as Thursday afternoon's double Potions lesson loomed nearer, "is a diversion. Then one of us can sneak into Snape's office and take what we need."

Harry and Ron looked at her nervously.

"I think I'd better do the actual stealing," Hermione continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "You two will be expelled if you get into any more trouble, and I've got a clean record. So all you need to do is cause enough mayhem to keep Snape busy for five minutes or so."

Harry smiled feebly. Deliberately causing mayhem in Snape's Potions class was about as safe as poking a sleeping dragon in the eye.

Potions lessons took place in one of the large dungeons. Thursday afternoon's lesson proceeded in the usual way. Twenty cauldrons stood steaming between the wooden desks, on which stood brass scales and jars of ingredients. Snape prowled through the fumes, making waspish remarks about the Gryffindors' work while the Slytherins sniggered appreciatively. Draco Malfoy, who was Snape's favorite student, kept flicking puffer-fish eyes at Ron and Harry, who knew that if they retaliated they would get detention faster than you could say "Unfair."

Harry's Swelling Solution was far too runny, but he had his mind on more important things. He was waiting for Hermione's signal, and he hardly listened as Snape paused to sneer at his watery

186

potion. When Snape turned and walked off to bully Neville, Hermione caught Harry's eye and nodded.

Harry ducked swiftly down behind his cauldron, pulled one of Fred's Filibuster fireworks out of his pocket, and gave it a quick prod with his wand. The firework began to fizz and sputter. Knowing he had only seconds, Harry straightened up, took aim, and lobbed it into the air; it landed right on target in Goyle's cauldron.

Goyle's potion exploded, showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them. Malfoy got a faceful and his nose began to swell like a balloon; Goyle blundered around, his

hands over his eyes, which had expanded to the size of a dinner plate - Snape was trying to restore calm and find out what had happened. Through the confusion, Harry saw Hermione slip quietly into Snape's office.

"Silence! SILENCE!" Snape roared. "Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draft - when I find out who did this -"

Harry tried not to laugh as he watched Malfoy hurry forward, his head drooping with the weight of a nose like a small melon. As half the class lumbered up to Snape's desk, some weighted down with arms like clubs, others unable to talk through gigantic puffedup lips, Harry saw Hermione slide back into the dungeon, the front of her robes bulging.

When everyone had taken a swig of antidote and the various swellings had subsided, Snape swept over to Goyle's cauldron and scooped out the twisted black remains of the firework. There was a sudden hush.

187

"If I ever find out who threw this," Snape whispered, "I shall make sure that person is expelled."

Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a puzzled expression. Snape was looking right at him, and the bell that rang ten minutes later could not have been more welcome.

"He knew it was me," Harry told Ron and Hermione as they hurried back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "I could tell."

Hermione threw the new ingredients into the cauldron and began to stir feverishly.

"It'll be ready in two weeks," she said happily.

"Snape can't prove it was you," said Ron reassuringly to Harry.
"What can he do?"

"Knowing Snape, something foul," said Harry as the potion frothed and bubbled.

A week later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were walking across the entrance hall when they saw a small knot of people gathered around the notice board, reading a piece of parchment that had just been pinned up. Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas beckoned them over, looking excited.

"They're starting a Dueling Club!" said Seamus. "First meeting tonight! I wouldn't mind dueling lessons; they might come in handy one of these days

"What, you reckon Slytherin's monster can duel?" said Ron, but he, too, read the sign with interest.

"Could be useful," he said to Harry and Hermione as they went into dinner. "Shall we go?"

Harry and Hermione were all for it, so at eight o'clock that

188

evening they hurried back to the Great Hall. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

"I wonder who'll be teaching us?" said Hermione as they edged into the chattering crowd. "Someone told me Flitwick was a dueling champion when he was young - maybe it'll be him."

"As long as it's not -" Harry began, but he ended on a groan: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions - for full

details, see my published works.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry - you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

"Wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?" Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

Snape's upper lip was curling. Harry wondered why Lockhart

189

was still smiling; if Snape had been looking at him like that he'd have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Lockhart and Snape turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Harry murmured, watching Snape baring his teeth.

"One - two - three -"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "Expelliarmus!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet: He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hermione was dancing on tiptoes. "Do you think he's all right?" she squealed through her fingers.

"Who cares?" said Harry and Ron together.

Lockhart was getting unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

"Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm - as you see, I've lost my wand - ah, thank you, Miss Brown - yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying

190

so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy - however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see . . ."

Snape was looking murderous. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because he said, "Enough demonstrating! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me -"

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lockhart teamed Neville with Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Snape reached Harry and Ron first.

"Time to split up the dream team, I think," he sneered. "Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter -"

Harry moved automatically toward Hermione.

"I don't think so," said Snape, smiling coldly. "Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger - you can partner Miss Bulstrode."

Malfoy strutted over, smirking. Behind him walked a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of a picture he'd seen in Holidays with Hags. She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggressively. Hermione gave her a weak smile that she did not return.

"Face your partners!" called Lockhart, back on the platform. "And bow!"

Harry and Malfoy barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart. "When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents - only to disarm them - we don't want any accidents - one ... two ... three -"

191

Harry swung his wand high, but Malfoy had already started on "two": His spell hit Harry so hard he felt as though he'd been hit over the head with a saucepan. He stumbled, but everything still seemed to be working, and wasting no more time, Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy and shouted, "Rictusempra!"

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he doubled up, wheezing.

"I said disarm only!" Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd, as Malfoy sank to his knees; Harry had hit him with a Tickling Charm, and he could barely move for laughing. Harry hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch Malfoy while he was on the floor, but this was a mistake; gasping for breath, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry's knees, choked, "Tarantallegra!" and the next second Harry's legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Lockhart, but Snape took charge.

"Finite Incantatem!" he shouted; Harry's feet stopped dancing, Malfoy stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of greenish smoke was hovering over the scene. Both Neville and Justin were lying on the floor, panting; Ron was holding up an ashen-faced Seamus, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode were still moving; Millicent had Hermione in a headlock and Hermione was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on the floor. Harry leapt forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than he was.

"Dear, dear," said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, looking at

the aftermath of the duels. "Up you go, Macmillan

192

Careful there, Miss Fawcett Pinch it hard, it'll stop bleeding in a second, Boot

"I think Id better teach you how to block unfriendly spells," said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. "Let's have a volunteer pair - Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you -"

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox." Neville's round, pink face went pinker. "How about Malfoy and Potter?" said Snape with a twisted smile.

"Excellent idea!" said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

"Now, Harry," said Lockhart. "When Draco points his wand at you, you do this."

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action, and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, "Whoops -my wand is a little overexcited -"

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too. Harry looked up nervously at Lockhart and said, "Professor, could you show me that blocking thing again?"

"Scared?" muttered Malfoy, so that Lockhart couldn't hear him.

"You wish," said Harry out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"What, drop my wand?"

But Lockhart wasn't listening.

"Three - two - one - go!" he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, "Serpensortia!"

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away, clearing the floor.

"Don't move, Potter," said Snape lazily, clearly enjoying the sight of Harry standing motionless, eye to eye with the angry snake. "I'll get rid of it

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged, hissing furiously, it slithered straight toward Justin Finch-Fletchley and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Harry wasn't sure what made him do it. He wasn't even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, "Leave him alone!" And miraculously - inexplicably - the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry. Harry felt the fear drain out of him. He knew the snake wouldn't attack anyone now, though how he knew it, he couldn't have explained.

He looked up at Justin, grinning, expecting to see Justin looking

194

relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful - but certainly not angry and scared.

"What do you think you're playing at?" he shouted, and before Harry could say anything, Justin had turned and stormed out of the hall.

Snape stepped forward, waved his wand, and the snake vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Snape, too, was looking at Harry in an

unexpected way. It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Harry didn't like it. He was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around the walls. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

"Come on," said Rods voice in his ear. "Move - come on -"

Ron steered him out of the hall, Hermione hurrying alongside them. As they went through the doors, the people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something. Harry didn't have a clue what was going on, and neither Ron nor Hermione explained anything until they had dragged him all the way up to the empty Gryffindor common room. Then Ron pushed Harry into an armchair and said, "You're a Parselmouth. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I'm a what?" said Harry.

"A Parselmouth!" said Ron. "You can talk to snakes!"

"I know," said Harry. "I mean, that's only the second time I've ever done it. I accidentally set a boa constrictor on my cousin Dudley at the zoo once - long story - but it was telling me it had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it free without meaning to that was before I knew I was a wizard -"

"A boa constrictor told you it had never seen Brazil?" Ron repeated faintly.

195

"So?" said Harry. "I bet loads of people here can do it."

"Oh, no they can't," said Ron. "It's not a very common gift. Harry, this is bad."

"What's bad?" said Harry, starting to feel quite angry. "What's wrong with everyone? Listen, if I hadn't told that snake not to attack Justin -"

"Oh, that's what you said to it?"

"What d'you mean? You were there - you heard me -"

"I heard you speaking Parseltongue," said Ron. "Snake language. You

could have been saying anything - no wonder Justin panicked, you sounded like you were egging the snake on or something - it was creepy, you know -"

Harry gaped at him.

"I spoke a different language? But - I didn't realize - how can I speak a language without knowing I can speak it?"

Ron shook his head. Both he and Hermione were looking as though someone had died. Harry couldn't see what was so terrible.

"D'you want to tell me what's wrong with stopping a massive snake biting off Justin's head?" he said. "What does it matter how I did it as long as Justin doesn't have to join the Headless Hunt?"

"It matters," said Hermione, speaking at last in a hushed voice, "because being able to talk to snakes was what Salazar Slytherin was famous for. That's why the symbol of Slytherin House is a serpent."

Harry's mouth fell open.

"Exactly," said Ron. "And now the whole school's going to think you're his great-great-great-great-grandson or something -"

"But I'm not," said Harry, with a panic he couldn't quite explain.

"You'll find that hard to prove," said Hermione. "He lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be."

* IL96 *

Harry lay awake for hours that night. Through a gap in the curtains around his four-poster he watched snow starting to drift past the tower window and wondered . . .

Could he be a descendant of Salazar Slithering? He didn't know anything about his father's family, after all. The Dursleys had always forbidden questions about his wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Harry tried to say something in Parseltongue. The words wouldn't come. It seemed he had to be face-to-face with a snake to

do it.

But I'm in Gryffindor, Harry thought. The Sorting Hat wouldn't have put me in here if I had Slytherin blood...

Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, but the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, don't you remember?

Harry turned over. He'd see Justin the next day in Herbology and he'd explain that he'd been calling the snake off, not egging it on, which (he thought angrily, pummeling his pillow) any fool should have realized.

By next morning, however, the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was canceled: Professor Sprout wanted to fit socks and scarves on the Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for the Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey.

Harry fretted about this next to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, while Ron and Hermione used their time off to play a game of wizard chess.

"For heaven's sake, Harry," said Hermione, exasperated, as one

197

of Ron's bishops wrestled her knight off his horse and dragged him off the board. "Go and find Justin if it's so important to you."

So Harry got up and left through the portrait hole, wondering where Justin might be.

The castle was darker than it usually was in daytime because of the thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Harry walked past classrooms where lessons were taking place, catching snatches of what was happening within. Professor McGonagall was shouting at someone who, by the sound of it, had turned his friend into a badger. Resisting the urge to take a look, Harry walked on by, thinking that Justin might be using his free time to catch up on some work, and deciding to check the library first.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were indeed sitting at the back of the library, but they didn't seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn't see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

"So anyway," a stout boy was saying, "I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter's marked him down as his next victim, it's best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually told him he'd been down for Eton. That's not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin's heir on the loose, is it?"

"You definitely think it is Potter, then, Ernie?" said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

198

"Hannah," said the stout boy solemnly, "he's a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that's the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue."

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, "Remember what was written on the wall? Enemies of the Heir, Beware. Potter had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Filch's cat's attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying Potter at the Quidditch match, taking pictures of him while he was lying in the mud. Next thing we know - Creevey's been attacked."

"He always seems so nice, though," said Hannah uncertainly, "and, well, he's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can't be all bad, can he?"

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie's words.

"No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I

mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that." He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, "That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

Harry couldn't take anymore. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn't been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Petrified by the sight of him, and the color was draining out of Ernie's face.

199

"Hello," said Harry. "I'm looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley."

The Hufflepuffs' worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

"What do you want with him?" said Ernie in a quavering voice.

"I wanted to tell him what really happened with that snake at the Dueling Club," said Harry.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taking a deep breath, said, "We were all there. We saw what happened."

"Then you noticed that after I spoke to it, the snake backed off?" said Harry.

"All I saw," said Ernie stubbornly, though he was trembling as he spoke, "was you speaking Parseltongue and chasing the snake toward Justin. "

"I didn't chase it at him!" Harry said, his voice shaking with anger. "It didn't even touch him!"

"It was a very near miss," said Ernie. "And in case you're getting ideas," he added hastily, "I might tell you that you can trace my family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and

my blood's as pure as anyone's, so -"

- cc I don't care what sort of blood you've got!" said Harry fiercely.
"Why would I want to attack Muggle-borns?"

"I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with," said Ernie swiftly.

"It's not possible to live with the Dursleys and not hate them," said Harry. "I'd like to see you try it."

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library, earning himself a reproving glare from Madam Pince, who was polishing the gilded cover of a large spellbook.

200

Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. The result was that he walked into something very large and solid, which knocked him backward onto the floor.

"Oh, hello, Hagrid," Harry said, looking up.

Hagrid's face was entirely hidden by a woolly, snow-covered balaclava, but it couldn't possibly be anyone else, as he filled most of the corridor in his moleskin overcoat. A dead rooster was hanging from one of his massive, gloved hands.

"All righ', Harry?" he said, pulling up the balaclava so he could speak. "Why aren't yeh in class?"

"Canceled," said Harry, getting up. "What're you doing in here?"

Hagrid held up the limp rooster.

"Second one killed this term," he explained. "It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin Bugbear, an' I need the Headmaster's permission ter put a charm around the hen coop."

He peered more closely at Harry from under his thick, snowflecked eyebrows.

"Yeh sure yeh're all righ'? Yeh look all hot an' bothered -"

Harry couldn't bring himself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of the Hufflepuffs had been saying about him.

"It's nothing," he said. "Id better get going, Hagrid, it's Transfiguration next and I've got to pick up my books."

He walked off, his mind still full of what Ernie had said about him.

"Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born

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Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor.

He turned to squint at what he'd fallen over and felt as though his stomach had dissolved.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn't all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and transparent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Justin's.

Harry got to his feet, his breathing fast and shallow, his heart doing a kind of drumroll against his ribs. He looked wildly up and down the deserted corridor and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from the bodies. The only sounds were the muffled voices of teachers from the classes on either side.

He could run, and no one would ever know he had been there. But he couldn't just leave them lying here He had to get help Would anyone believe he hadn't had anything to do with this?

As he stood there, panicking, a door right next to him opened with a bang. Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting out.

"Why, it's potty wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, knocking Harry's glasses askew as he bounced past him. "What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking -"

202

Peeves stopped, halfway through a midair somersault. Upside down, he spotted Justin and Nearly Headless Nick. He flipped the right way up, filled his lungs and, before Harry could stop him, screamed, "ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!"

Crash - crash - crash - door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off aloud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie the Hufflepuff arrived, panting, on the scene.

"Caught in the act!" Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

"That will do, Macmillan!" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, now grinning wickedly, surveying the scene; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:

"Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,
You're killing off' students, you think it's good fun -"

"That's enough Peeves!" barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

203

Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs. This Ernie did, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone together.

"This way, Potter," she said.

"Professor," said Harry at once, "I swear I didn't -"

"This is out of my hands, Potter," said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle.

"Lemon drop!" she said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn't fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

He knew now where he was being taken. This must be where Dumbledore lived.

204

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE POLYJUICE POTION

They stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

Harry looked around. One thing was certain: of all the teachers' offices Harry had visited so far this year, Dumbledore's was by far the most interesting. If he hadn't been scared out of his wits that he was about to be thrown out of school, he would have been very pleased to have a chance to look around it.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindlelegged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat - the Sorting Hat.

205

Harry hesitated. He cast a wary eye around the sleeping witches and wizards on the walls. Surely it couldn't hurt if he took the hat down and tried it on again? Just to see ... just to make sure it had put him in the right House

He walked quietly around the desk, lifted the hat from its shelf, and lowered it slowly onto his head. It was much too large and slipped down over his eyes, just as it had done the last time he'd put it on. Harry stared at the black inside of the hat, waiting. Then a small voice said in his ear, "Bee in your bonnet, Harry Potter?"

"Er, yes," Harry muttered. "Er - sorry to bother you - I wanted to ask -"

"You've been wondering whether I put you in the right House," said the hat smartly. "Yes ... you were particularly difficult to place. But I stand by what I said before" - Harry's heart leapt - "you would have done well in Slytherin -"

Harry's stomach plummeted. He grabbed the point of the hat and pulled it off. It hung limply in his hand, grubby and faded. Harry pushed it back onto its shelf, feeling sick.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the still and silent hat. It didn't move. Harry backed away, watching it. Then a strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around.

He wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's

pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smouldering pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird - I couldn't do anything - he just caught fire -"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"About time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him . . ."

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures,

phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets."

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled

himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

Before Dumbledore could speak another word, however, the door of the office flew open with an almighty bang and Hagrid burst in, a wild look in his eyes, his balaclava perched on top of his shaggy black head and the dead rooster still swinging from his hand.

"It wasn't Harry, Professor Dumbledore!" said Hagrid urgently. "I was talkin' ter him seconds before that kid was found, he never had time, sir -"

Dumbledore tried to say something, but Hagrid went ranting on, waving the rooster around in his agitation, sending feathers everywhere.

"- it can't've bin him, I'll swear it in front o' the Ministry o' Magic if I have to -"

"Hagrid, I -"

"- yeh've got the wrong boy, sir, I know Harry never ="

"Hagrid!" said Dumbledore loudly. "I do not think that Harry attacked those people."

"Oh," said Hagrid, the rooster falling limply at his side. "Right. I'll wait outside then, Headmaster."

And he stomped out looking embarrassed.

"You don't think it was me, Professor?" Harry repeated hopefully as Dumbledore brushed rooster feathers off his desk.

"No, Harry, I don't," said Dumbledore, though his face was somber again. "But I still want to talk to you."

Harry waited nervously while Dumbledore considered him, the tips of his long fingers together.

208

"I must ask you, Harry, whether there is anything you'd like to tell me," he said gently. "Anything at all."

Harry didn't know what to say. He thought of Malfoy shouting, "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" and of the Polyjuice Potion simmering away in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Then he thought of the disembodied voice he had heard twice and remembered what Ron had said: "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world." He thought, too, about what everyone was saying about him, and his growing dread that he was somehow connected with Salazar Slytherin

"No," said Harry. "There isn't anything, Professor"

The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick's fate that seemed to worry people most. What could possibly do that to a ghost? people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express so that students could go home for Christmas.

"At this rate, we'll be the only ones left," Ron told Harry and Hermione. "Us, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. What a jolly holiday it's going to be."

Crabbe and Goyle, who always did whatever Malfoy did, had signed up to stay over the holidays, too. But Harry was glad that most people were leaving. He was tired of people skirting around him in the corridors, as though he was about to sprout fangs or spit poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and hissing as he passed.

209

Fred and George, however, found all this very funny. They went out of their way to march ahead of Harry down the corridors, shouting,

"Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wizard coming through

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behavior.

"It is not a laughing matter," he said coldly.

"Oh, get out of the way, Percy," said Fred. "Harry's in a hurry."

"Yeah, he's off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant," said George, chortling.

Ginny didn't find it amusing either.

"Oh, don't," she wailed every time Fred asked Harry loudly who he was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Harry off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Harry didn't mind; it made him feel better that Fred and George, at least, thought the idea of his being Slytherin's heir was quite ludicrous. But their antics seemed to be aggravating Draco Malfoy, who looked increasingly sour each time he saw them at it.

"It's because he's bursting to say it's really him," said Ron knowingly. "You know how he hates anyone beating him at anything, and you're getting all the credit for his dirty work."

"Not for long," said Hermione in a satisfied tone. "The Polyjuice Potion's nearly ready. We'll be getting the truth out of him any day now."

At last the term ended, and a silence deep as the snow on the grounds descended on the castle. Harry found it peaceful, rather than gloomy, and enjoyed the fact that he, Hermione, and the Weasleys had the run of Gryffindor Tower, which meant they could

210

play Exploding Snap loudly without bothering anyone, and practice dueling in private. Fred, George, and Ginny had chosen to stay at school rather than visit Bill in Egypt with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Percy, who disapproved of what he termed their childish behavior,

didn't spend much time in the Gryffindor common room. He had already told them pompously that he was only staying over Christmas because it was his duty as a prefect to support the teachers during this troubled time.

Christmas morning dawned, cold and white. Harry and Ron, the only ones left in their dormitory, were woken very early by Hermione, who burst in, fully dressed and carrying presents for them both.

"Wake up," she said loudly, pulling back the curtains at the window.

"Hermione - you're not supposed to be in here -" said Ron, shielding his eyes against the light.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," said Hermione, throwing him his present. "I've been up for nearly an hour, adding more lacewings to the potion. It's ready."

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Hermione, shifting Scabbers the rat so that she could sit down on the end of Ron's four-poster. "If we're going to do it, I say it should be tonight."

At that moment, Hedwig swooped into the room, carrying a very small package in her beak.

"Hello," said Harry happily as she landed on his bed. "Are you speaking to me again?"

211

She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way, which was a far better present than the one that she had brought him, which turned out to be from the Dursleys. They had sent Harry a toothpick and a note telling him to find out whether he'd be able to stay at Hogwarts for the summer vacation, too.

The rest of Harry's Christmas presents were far more satisfactory. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle fudge, which Harry decided

to soften by the fire before eating; Ron had given him a book called *Flying with the Cannons*, a book of interesting facts about his favorite Quidditch team, and Hermione had bought him a luxury eagle-feather quill. Harry opened the last present to find a new, hand-knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a large plum cake. He read her card with a fresh surge of guilt, thinking about Mr. Weasley's car (which hadn't been seen since its crash with the Whomping Willow), and the bout of rule-breaking he and Ron were planning next.

No one, not even someone dreading taking Polyjuice Potion later, could fail to enjoy Christmas dinner at Hogwarts.

The Great Hall looked magnificent. Not only were there a dozen frost-covered Christmas trees and thick streamers of holly and mistletoe crisscrossing the ceiling, but enchanted snow was falling, warm and dry, from the ceiling. Dumbledore led them in a few of his favorite carols, Hagrid booming more and more loudly with every goblet of eggnog he consumed. Percy, who hadn't noticed that Fred had bewitched his prefect badge so that it now read "Pinhead," kept asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry didn't even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud, snide remarks

* 2:L2 *

about his new sweater from the Slytherin table. With a bit of luck, Malfoy would be getting his comeuppance in a few hours' time.

Harry and Ron had barely finished their third helpings of Christmas pudding when Hermione ushered them out of the hall to finalize their plans for the evening.

"We still need a bit of the people you're changing into," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as though she were sending them to the supermarket for laundry detergent. "And obviously, it'll be best if you can get something of Crabbe's and Goyle's; they're Malfoys' best friends, he'll tell them anything. And we also need to make sure the real Crabbe and Goyle can't burst in on us while we're interrogating him.

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces. She held up two plump chocolate cakes. "I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught. All you have to do is

make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them. You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them. Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

Harry and Ron looked incredulously at each other.

"Hermione, I don't think -"

"That could go seriously wrong -"

But Hermione had a steely glint in her eye not unlike the one Professor McGonagall sometimes had.

"The potion will be useless without Crabbe's and Goyle's hair," she said sternly. "You do want to investigate Malfoy, don't you?"

"Oh, all right, all right," said Harry. "But what about you? Whose hair are you ripping out?"

213

"I've already got mine!" said Hermione brightly, pulling a tiny bottle out of her pocket and showing them the single hair inside it.

"Remember Millicent Bulstrode wrestling with me at the Dueling Club? She left this on my robes when she was trying to strangle me! And she's gone home for Christmas - so I'll just have to tell the Slytherins I've decided to come back."

When Hermione had bustled off to check on the Polyjuice Potion again, Ron turned to Harry with a doom-laden expression.

"Have you ever heard of a plan where so many things could go wrong?"

But to Harry's and Ron's utter amazement, stage one of the operation went just as smoothly as Hermione had said. They lurked in the deserted entrance hall after Christmas tea, waiting for Crabbe and Goyle who had remained alone at the Slytherin table, shoveling down fourth helpings of trifle. Harry had perched the chocolate cakes on the end of the banisters. When they spotted Crabbe and Goyle coming out of the Great Hall, Harry and Ron hid quickly behind a suit of armor next to the front door.

"How thick can you get?" Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor.

By far the hardest part was hiding them in the closet across the hall. Once they were safely stowed among the buckets and mops, Harry yanked out a couple of the bristles that covered Goyle's fore

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head and Ron pulled out several of Crabbe's hairs. They also stole their shoes, because their own were far too small for Crabbe- and Goyle-size feet. Then, still stunned at what they had just done, they sprinted up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They could hardly see for the thick black smoke issuing from the stall in which Hermione was stirring the cauldron. Pulling their robes up over their faces, Harry and Ron knocked softly on the door.

"Hermione?"

They heard the scrape of the lock and Hermione emerged, shiny-faced and looking anxious. Behind her they heard the gloop gloop of the bubbling, glutinous potion. Three glass tumblers stood ready on the toilet seat.

"Did you get them?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Harry showed her Goyle's hair.

"Good. And I sneaked these spare robes out of the laundry," Hermione said, holding up a small sack. "You'll need bigger sizes once you're Crabbe and Goyle."

The three of them stared into the cauldron. Close up, the potion looked like thick, dark mud, bubbling sluggishly.

"I'm sure I've done everything right," said Hermione, nervously

rereading the splotched page of Moste Potente Potions. "It looks like the book says it should ... once we've drunk it, we'll have exactly an hour before we change back into ourselves."

"Now what?" Ron whispered.

"We separate it into three glasses and add the hairs."

Hermione ladled large dollops of the potion into each of the glasses. Then, her hand trembling, she shook Millicent Bulstrode's hair out of its bottle into the first glass.

215

The potion hissed loudly like a boiling kettle and frothed madly. A second later, it had turned a sick sort of yellow.

"Urgh - essence of Millicent Bulstrode," said Ron, eyeing it with loathing. "Bet it tastes disgusting."

"Add yours, then," said Hermione.

Harry dropped Goyle's hair into the middle glass and Ron put Crabbe's into the last one. Both glasses hissed and frothed: Goyle's turned the khaki color of a booger, Crabbe's a dark, murky brown.

"Hang on," said Harry as Ron and Hermione reached for their glasses. "We'd better not all drink them in here Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won't fit. And Millicent Bulstrode's no pixie.

"Good thinking," said Ron, unlocking the door. "We'll take separate stalls."

Careful not to spill a drop of his Polyjuice Potion, Harry slipped into the middle stall.

"Ready?" he called.

"Ready," came Ron's and Hermione's voices.

"One - two - three -"

Pinching his nose, Harry drank the potion down in two large gulps. It tasted like overcooked cabbage.

Immediately, his insides started writhing as though he'd just swallowed live snakes - doubled up, he wondered whether he was going to be sick - then a burning sensation spread rapidly from his stomach to the very ends of his fingers and toes - next, bringing him gasping to all fours, came a horrible melting feeling, as the skin all over his body bubbled like hot wax - and before his eyes, his hands began to grow, the fingers thickened, the nails broadened,

* 2116 *

the knuckles were bulging like bolts -his shoulders stretched painfully and a prickling on his forehead told him that hair was creeping down toward his eyebrows - his robes ripped as his chest expanded like a barrel bursting its hoops - his feet were agony in shoes four sizes too small

As suddenly as it had started, everything stopped. Harry lay facedown on the stone-cold floor, listening to Myrtle gurgling morosely in the end toilet. With difficulty, he kicked off his shoes and stood up. So this was what it felt like, being Goyle. His large hand trembling, he pulled off his old robes, which were hanging a foot above his ankles, pulled on the spare ones, and laced up Goyle's boatlike shoes. He reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and met only the short growth of wiry bristles, low on his forehead. Then he realized that his glasses were clouding his eyes because Goyle obviously didn't need them - he took them off and called, "Are you two okay?" Goyle's low rasp of a voice issued from his mouth.

"Yeah," came the deep grunt of Crabbe from his right.

Harry unlocked his door and stepped in front of the cracked mirror. Goyle stared back at him out of dull, deepset eyes. Harry scratched his ear. So did Goyle.

Ron's door opened. They stared at each other. Except that he looked pale and shocked, Ron was indistinguishable from Crabbe, from the pudding-bowl haircut to the long, gorilla arms.

"This is unbelievable," said Ron, approaching the mirror and prodding

Crabbe's flat nose. "Unbelievable. "

"We'd better get going," said Harry, loosening the watch that was cutting into Goyle's thick wrist. "We've still got to find out

* 217*

where the Slytherin common room is. I only hope we can find someone to follow. . ."

Ron, who had been gazing at Harry, said, "You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle thinking." He banged on Hermione's door. "C'mon, we need to go -"

A high-pitched voice answered him.

"I - I don't think I'm going to come after all. You go on without me.

"Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode's ugly, no one's going to know it's you -"

"No - really - I don't think I'll come. You two hurry up, you're wasting time

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered.

"That looks more like Goyle," said Ron. "That's how he looks every time a teacher asks him a question."

"Hermione, are you okay?" said Harry through the door.

"Fine - I'm fine - go on -"

Harry looked at his watch. Five of their precious sixty minutes had already passed.

"We'll meet you back here, all right?" he said.

Harry and Ron opened the door of the bathroom carefully, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

"Don't swing your arms like that," Harry muttered to Ron.

"Eh?"

"Crabbe holds them sort of stiff"

"How's this?"

"Yeah, that's better"

They went down the marble staircase. All they needed now was

218

a Slytherin that they could follow to the Slytherin common room, but there was nobody around.

"Any ideas?" muttered Harry.

"The Slytherins always come up to breakfast from over there," said Ron, nodding at the entrance to the dungeons. The words had barely left his mouth when a girl with long, curly hair emerged from the entrance.

"Excuse me," said Ron, hurrying up to her. "We've forgotten the way to our common room."

"I beg your pardon?" said the girl stiffly. "Our common room? I'm a Ravenclaw."

She walked away, looking suspiciously back at them.

Harry and Ron hurried down the stone steps into the darkness, their footsteps echoing particularly loudly as Crabbe's and Goyle's huge feet hit the floor, feeling that this wasn't going to be as easy as they had hoped.

The labyrinthine passages were deserted. They walked deeper and deeper under the school, constantly checking their watches to see how much time they had left. After a quarter of an hour, just when they were getting desperate, they heard a sudden movement ahead.

"Ha!" said Ron excitedly. "There's one of them now!"

The figure was emerging from a side room. As they hurried nearer, however, their hearts sank. It wasn't a Slytherin, it was Percy.

"What're you doing down here?" said Ron in surprise.

Percy looked affronted.

"That," he said stiffly, "is none of your business. It's Crabbe, isn't it?"

2 19

"Wh - oh, yeah," said Ron.

"Well, get off to your dormitories," said Percy sternly. "It's not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days."

"You are," Ron pointed out.

"I," said Percy, drawing himself up, "am a prefect. Nothing's about to attack me."

A voice suddenly echoed behind Harry and Ron. Draco Malfoy was strolling toward them, and for the first time in his life, Harry was pleased to see him.

"There you are," he drawled, looking at them. "Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I've been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny."

Malfoy glanced witheringly at Percy.

"And what're you doing down here, Weasley?" he sneered.

Percy looked outraged.

"You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!" he said. "I don't like your attitude!"

Malfoy sneered and motioned for Harry and Ron to follow him. Harry almost said something apologetic to Percy but caught himself just in time. He and Ron hurried after Malfoy, who said as they turned into

the next passage, "That Peter Weasley -"

"Percy," Ron corrected him automatically.

"Whatever," said Malfoy. "I've noticed him sneaking around a lot lately. And I bet I know what he's up to. He thinks he's going to catch Slytherin's heir single-handed."

He gave a short, derisive laugh. Harry and Ron exchanged excited looks.

Malfoy paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall.

* 220 *

"What's the new password again?" he said to Harry.

"Er -" said Harry.

"Oh, yeah -pure-blood!" said Malfoy, not listening, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open. Malfoy marched through it, and Harry and Ron followed him.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

"Wait here," said Malfoy to Harry and Ron, motioning them to a pair of empty chairs set back from the fire. "I'll go and get it my father's just sent it to me -"

Wondering what Malfoy was going to show them, Harry and Ron sat down, doing their best to look at home.

Malfoy came back a minute later, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping. He thrust it under Ron's nose.

"That'll give you a laugh," he said.

Harry saw Ron's eyes widen in shock. He read the clipping quickly,

gave a very forced laugh, and handed it to Harry.

It had been clipped out of the Daily Prophet, and it said:

INQUIRY AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty Galleons for bewitching a Muggle car.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the

221

enchanted car crashed earlier this year, called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation.

"Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute," Mr. Malfoy told our reporter. "He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."

Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

"Well?" said Malfoy impatiently as Harry handed the clipping back to him. "Don't you think it's funny?"

"Ha, ha," said Harry bleakly.

"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand in half and go and join them," said Malfoy scornfully. "You'd never know the Weasleys were pure-bloods, the way they behave."

Ron's - or rather, Crabbe's - face was contorted with fury.

"What's up with you, Crabbe?" snapped Malfoy.

"Stomachache," Ron grunted.

"Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me," said Malfoy, snickering. "You know, I'm surprised the Daily Prophet hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he went on thoughtfully.

"I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said old Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never've let slime like that Creevey in."

222

Malfoy started taking pictures with an imaginary camera and did a cruel but accurate impression of Colin: "'Potter, can I have your picture, Potter? Can I have your autograph? Can I lick your shoes, please, Potter?'"

He dropped his hands and looked at Harry and Ron.

"What's the matter with you two?"

Far too late, Harry and Ron forced themselves to laugh, but Malfoy seemed satisfied; perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were always slow on the uptake.

"Saint Potter, the Mudbloods' friend," said Malfoy slowly. "He's another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn't go around with that jumped up Granger Mudblood. And people think he's Slytherin's heir!"

Harry and Ron waited with bated breath: Malfoy was surely seconds away from telling them it was him - but then

"I wish I knew who it is," said Malfoy petulantly. "I could help them."

Ron's jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn't notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, "You must have some idea who's behind it all

"You know I haven't, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Malfoy. "And Father won't tell me anything about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing - last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood died. So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time I hope it's Granger," he said with

relish.

Ron was clenching Crabbe's gigantic fists. Feeling that it would be a bit of a giveaway if Ron punched Malfoy, Harry shot him a warning look and said, "D'you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?"

"Oh, yeah ... whoever it was was expelled," said Malfoy. "They're probably still in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" said Harry, puzzled.

"Azkaban - the wizard prison, Goyle," said Malfoy, looking at him in disbelief "Honestly, if you were any slower, you'd be going backward."

He shifted restlessly in his chair and said, "Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

Harry tried to force Goyle's dull face into a look of concern.

"Yeah. . ." said Malfoy. "Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some very valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor

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"Ho!" said Ron.

Malfoy looked at him. So did Harry. Ron blushed. Even his hair was turning red. His nose was also slowly lengthening - their hour was up, Ron was turning back into himself, and from the look of horror he was suddenly giving Harry, he must be, too.

They both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping

against hope that Malfoy hadn't noticed anything. Harry

224

could feel his feet slipping around in Goyle's huge shoes and had to hoist up his robes as he shrank; they crashed up the steps into the dark entrance hall, which was full of a muffled pounding coming from the closet where they'd locked Crabbe and Goyle. Leaving their shoes outside the closet door, they sprinted in their socks up the marble staircase toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time," Ron panted, closing the bathroom door behind them. "I know we still haven't found out who's doing the attacks, but I'm going to write to Dad tomorrow and tell him to check under the Malfoys' drawing room."

Harry checked his face in the cracked mirror. He was back to normal. He put his glasses on as Ron hammered on the door of Hermione's stall.

"Hermione, come out, we've got loads to tell you -"

"Go away!" Hermione squeaked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"What's the matter?" said Ron. "You must be back to normal by now, we are

But Moaning Myrtle glided suddenly through the stall door. Harry had never seen her looking so happy.

"Ooooooh, wait till you see," she said. "It's awful-"

They heard the lock slide back and Hermione emerged, sobbing, her robes pulled up over her head.

"What's up?" said Ron uncertainly. "Have you still got Millicent's nose or something?"

Hermione let her robes fall and Ron backed into the sink.

Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had turned yellow and there were long, pointed ears poking through her hair.

"It was a c-cat hair!" she howled. "M-Millicent Bulstrode

225

m-must have a cat! And the p-potion isn't supposed to be used for animal transformations!"

"Uh-oh," said Ron.

"You'll be teased something dreadful," said Myrtle happily.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Harry quickly. "We'll take you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey never asks too many questions

It took a long time to persuade Hermione to leave the bathroom. Moaning Myrtle sped them on their way with a hearty guffaw. "Wait till everyone finds out you've got a tail!"

Hermione remained in the hospital wing for several weeks. There was a flurry of rumor about her disappearance when the rest of the school arrived back from their Christmas holidays, because of course everyone thought that she had been attacked. So many students filed past the hospital wing trying to catch a glimpse of her that Madam Pomfrey took out her curtains again and placed them around Hermione's bed, to spare her the shame of being seen with a furry face.

Harry and Ron went to visit her every evening. When the new term started, they brought her each day's homework.

"If I'd sprouted whiskers, I'd take a break from work," said Ron, tipping a stack of books onto Hermione's bedside table one evening.

"Don't be silly, Ron, I've got to keep up," said Hermione briskly. Her spirits were greatly improved by the fact that all the hair had

* "21 *

gone from her face and her eyes were turning slowly back to brown. "I don't suppose you've got any new leads?" she added in a whisper, so that Madam Pomfrey couldn't hear her.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

"I was so sure it was Malfoy," said Ron, for about the hundredth time.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to something gold sticking out from under Hermione's pillow.

"Just a get well card," said Hermione hastily, trying to poke it out of sight, but Ron was too quick for her. He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud:

"To Miss Granger, wishing you a speedy recovery, from your concerned teacher, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most- Charming-Smile Award. "

Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted.

"You sleep with this under your pillow?"

But Hermione was spared answering by Madam Pomfrey sweeping over with her evening dose of medicine.

"Is Lockhart the smarmiest bloke you've ever met, or what?" Ron said to Harry as they left the infirmary and started up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape had given them so much homework, Harry thought he was likely to be in the sixth year before he finished it. Ron was just saying he wished he had asked Hermione how many rat tails you were supposed to add to a HairRaising Potion when an angry outburst from the floor above reached their ears.

"That's Filch," Harry muttered as they hurried up the stairs and paused, out of sight, listening hard.

* 228*

"You don't think someone else's been attacked?" said Ron tensely.

They stood still, their heads inclined toward Filch's voice, which sounded quite hysterical.

"= even more work for me! Mopping all night, like I haven't got enough to do! No, this is the final straw, I'm going to Dumbledore -"

His footsteps receded along the out-of-sight corridor and they heard a distant door slam.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post: They were once again on the spot where Mrs. Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over half the corridor, and it looked as though it was still seeping from under the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Now that Filch had stopped shouting, they could hear Myrtle's wails echoing off the bathroom walls.

"Now what's up with her?" said Ron.

"Let's go and see," said Harry, and holding their robes over their ankles they stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its OUT OF ORDER sign, ignored it as always, and entered.

Moaning Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down her usual toilet. It was dark in the bathroom because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

"What's up, Myrtle?" said Harry.

"Who's that?" glugged Myrtle miserably. "Come to throw something else at me?"

Harry waded across to her stall and said, "Why would I throw something at you?"

229

"Don't ask me," Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more

water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me

"But it can't hurt you if someone throws something at you," said Harry, reasonably. "I mean, it'd just go right through you, wouldn't it?"

He had said the wrong thing. Myrtle puffed herself up and shrieked, "Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I don't think!"

"Who threw it at you, anyway?" asked Harry.

"I don't know... I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head," said Myrtle, glaring at them. "It's over there, it got washed out

Harry and Ron looked under the sink where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped forward to pick it up, but Ron suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

"What?" said Harry.

"Are you crazy?" said Ron. "It could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" said Harry, laughing. "Come off it, how could it be dangerous?"

"You'd be surprised," said Ron, who was looking apprehensively at the book. "Some of the books the Ministry's confiscated Dad's told me - there was one that burned your eyes out. And

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everyone who read Sonnets of a Sorcerer spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could never stop reading! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed. And -"

"All right, I've got the point," said Harry.

The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy.

"Well, we won't find out unless we look at it," he said, and he ducked around Ron and picked it up off the floor.

Harry saw at once that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him it was fifty years old. He opened it eagerly. On the first page he could just make out the name "T M. Riddle" in smudged ink.

"Hang on," said Ron, who had approached cautiously and was looking over Harry's shoulder. "I know that name T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago."

"How on earth d'you know that?" said Harry in amazement.

"Because Filch made me polish his shield about fifty times in detention," said Ron resentfully. "That was the one I burped slugs all over. If you'd wiped slime off a name for an hour, you'd remember it, too."

Harry peeled the wet pages apart. They were completely blank. There wasn't the faintest trace of writing on any of them, not even Auntie Mabel's birthday, or dentist, half-past three.

"He never wrote in it," said Harry, disappointed.

"I wonder why someone wanted to flush it away?" said Ron curiously.

Harry turned to the back cover of the book and saw the printed name of a variety store on Vauxhall Road, London.

*231 *

"He must've been Muggle-born," said Harry thoughtfully. "To have bought a diary from Vauxhall Road

"Well, it's not much use to you," said Ron. He dropped his voice. "Fifty points if you can get it through Myrtle's nose."

Harry, however, pocketed it.

Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and furfree, at the beginning of February. On her first evening back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry showed her T. M. Riddle's diary and told her the story of how they had found it.

"Oooh, it might have hidden powers," said Hermione enthusiastically, taking the diary and looking at it closely.

"If it has, it's hiding them very well," said Ron. "Maybe it's shy. I don't know why you don't chuck it, Harry."

"I wish I knew why someone did try to chuck it," said Harry. "I wouldn't mind knowing how Riddle got an award for special services to Hogwarts either."

"Could've been anything," said Ron. "Maybe he got thirty O.W.L.s or saved a teacher from the giant squid. Maybe he murdered Myrtle; that would've done everyone a favor

But Harry could tell from the arrested look on Hermione's face that she was thinking what he was thinking.

"What?" said Ron, looking from one to the other.

"Well, the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago, wasn't it?" he said. "That's what Malfoy said."

"Yeah. . ." said Ron slowly.

"And this diary is fifty years old," said Hermione, tapping it excitedly.

232

a so?

"Oh, Ron, wake up," snapped Hermione. "We know the person who opened the Chamber last time was expelled fifty years ago. We know T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago. Well, what if Riddle got his special award for catching the Heir of

Slytherin? His diary would probably tell us everything - where the Chamber is, and how to open it, and what sort of creature lives in it - the person who's behind the attacks this time wouldn't want that lying around, would they?"

"That's a brilliant theory, Hermione," said Ron, "with just one tiny little flaw. There's nothing written in his diary."

But Hermione was pulling her wand out of her bag.

"It might be invisible ink!" she whispered.

She tapped the diary three times and said, "Aparecium!"

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Hermione shoved her hand back into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be a bright red eraser.

"It's a Revealer, I got it in Diagon Alley," she said.

She rubbed hard on January first. Nothing happened.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing to find in there," said Ron. "Riddle just got a diary for Christmas and couldn't be bothered filling it in."

Harry couldn't explain, even to himself, why he didn't just throw Riddle's diary away. The fact was that even though he knew the diary was blank, he kept absentmindedly picking it up and turning the pages, as though it were a story he wanted to finish. And while Harry was sure he had never heard the name T. M. Riddle before, it still seemed to mean something to him, almost as though

* 233 *

Riddle was a friend he'd had when he was very small, and had half-forgotten. But this was absurd. He'd never had friends before Hogwarts, Dudley had made sure of that.

Nevertheless, Harry was determined to find out more about Riddle, so next day at break, he headed for the trophy room to examine Riddle's special award, accompanied by an interested Hermione and a thoroughly unconvinced Ron, who told them he'd seen enough of the trophy room to last him a lifetime.

Riddle's burnished gold shield was tucked away in a corner cabinet. It didn't carry details of why it had been given to him ("Good thing, too, or it'd be even bigger and I'd still be polishing it," said Ron). However, they did find Riddle's name on an old Medal for Magical Merit, and on a list of old Head Boys.

"He sounds like Percy," said Ron, wrinkling his nose in disgust.
"Prefect, Head Boy ... probably top of every class -"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Hermione in a slightly hurt voice.

The sun had now begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts again. Inside the castle, the mood had grown more hopeful. There had been no more attacks since those on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, and Madam Pomfrey was pleased to report that the Mandrakes were becoming moody and secretive, meaning that they were fast leaving childhood.

"The moment their acne clears up, they'll be ready for repotting again," Harry heard her telling Filch kindly one afternoon. "And after that, it won't be long until we're cutting them up and stewing them. You'll have Mrs. Norris back in no time."

* 243 *

Perhaps the Heir of Slytherin had lost his or her nerve, thought Harry. It must be getting riskier and riskier to open the Chamber of Secrets, with the school so alert and suspicious. Perhaps the monster, whatever it was, was even now settling itself down to hibernate for another fifty years

Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff didn't take this cheerful view. He was still convinced that Harry was the guilty one, that he had "given himself away" at the Dueling Club. Peeves wasn't helping matters; he kept popping up in the crowded corridors singing "Oh, Potter, you rotter . . ." now with a dance routine to match.

Gilderoy Lockhart seemed to think he himself had made the attacks stop. Harry overheard him telling Professor McGonagall so while the Gryffindors were lining up for Transfiguration.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble, Minerva," he said, tapping his nose knowingly and winking. "I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him. Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him.

"You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won't say any more just now, but I think I know just the thing"

He tapped his nose again and strode off.

Lockhart's idea of a morale-booster became clear at breakfast time on February fourteenth. Harry hadn't had much sleep because of a late-running Quidditch practice the night before, and he hurried down to the Great Hall, slightly late. He thought, for a moment, that he'd walked through the wrong doors.

The walls were all covered with large, lurid pink flowers. Worse

* 235*

still, heart-shaped confetti was falling from the pale blue ceiling. Harry went over to the Gryffindor table, where Ron was sitting looking sickened, and Hermione seemed to have been overcome with giggles.

"What's going on?" Harry asked them, sitting down and wiping confetti off his bacon.

Ron pointed to the teachers' table, apparently too disgusted to speak. Lockhart, wearing lurid pink robes to match the decorations, was waving for silence. The teachers on either side of him were looking stony-faced. From where he sat, Harry could see a muscle going in Professor McGonagall's cheek. Snape looked as though someone had just fed him a large beaker of Skele-Gro.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockhart shouted. "And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all - and it doesn't end here!"

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs. Not just any dwarfs, however. Lockhart had them all wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" beamed Lockhart. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Professor Flitwick buried his face in his hands. Snape was look

* 236

ing as though the first person to ask him for a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

"Please, Hermione, tell me you weren't one of the forty-six, 51 said Ron as they left the Great Hall for their first lesson. Hermione suddenly became very interested in searching her bag for her schedule and didn't answer.

All day long, the dwarfs kept barging into their classes to deliver valentines, to the annoyance of the teachers, and late that afternoon as the Gryffindors were walking upstairs for Charms, one of the dwarfs caught up with Harry.

"Oy, you! 'Arty Potter!" shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

Hot all over at the thought of being given a valentine in front of a line of first years, which happened to include Ginny Weasley, Harry tried to escape. The dwarf, however, cut his way through the crowd by kicking people's shins, and reached him before he'd gone two paces.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arty Potter in person," he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

"Not here," Harry hissed, trying to escape.

"Stay still!" grunted the dwarf, grabbing hold of Harry's bag and pulling him back.

"Let me go!" Harry snarled, tugging.

With a loud ripping noise, his bag split in two. His books, wand, parchment, and quill spilled onto the floor and his ink bottle smashed over everything.

Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up before the dwarf started singing, causing something of a holdup in the corridor.

237

"What's going on here?" came the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy. Harry started stuffing everything feverishly into his ripped bag, desperate to get away before Malfoy could hear his musical valentine.

"What's all this commotion?" said another familiar voice as Percy Weasley arrived.

Losing his head, Harry tried to make a run for it, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor.

"Right," he said, sitting on Harry's ankles. "Here is your singing valentine:

His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord

Harry would have given all the gold in Gringotts to evaporate on the spot. Trying valiantly to laugh along with everyone else, he got up, his feet numb from the weight of the dwarf, as Percy Weasley did his best to disperse the crowd, some of whom were crying with mirth.

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now," he said, shooing some of the younger students away. "And you, Malfoy-

Harry, glancing over, saw Malfoy stoop and snatch up something. Leering, he showed it to Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry realized that he'd got Riddle's diary.

"Give that back," said Harry quietly.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" said Malfoy, who obvi

* 238

ously hadn't noticed the year on the cover and thought he had Harry's own diary. A hush fell over the onlookers. Ginny was staring from the diary to Harry, looking terrified.

"Hand it over, Malfoy," said Percy sternly.

"When I've had a look," said Malfoy, waving the diary tauntingly at Harry.

Percy said, "As a school prefect -" but Harry had lost his temper. He pulled out his wand and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" and just as Snape had disarmed Lockhart, so Malfoy found the diary shooting out of his hand into the air. Ron, grinning broadly, caught it.

"Harry!" said Percy loudly. "No magic in the corridors. I'll have to report this, you know!"

But Harry didn't care, he was one-up on Malfoy, and that was worth five points from Gryffindor any day. Malfoy was looking furious, and as Ginny passed him to enter her classroom, he yelled spitefully after her, "I don't think Potter liked your valentine much!"

Ginny covered her face with her hands and ran into class. Snarling, Ron pulled out his wand, too, but Harry pulled him away. Ron didn't need to spend the whole of Charms belching slugs.

It wasn't until they had reached Professor Flitwick's class that Harry noticed something rather odd about Riddle's diary. All his other books were drenched in scarlet ink. The diary, however, was as clean as it had been before the ink bottle had smashed all over it. He tried to point this out to Ron, but Ron was having trouble with his

wand again; large purple bubbles were blossoming out of the end, and he wasn't much interested in anything else.

Harry went to bed before anyone else in his dormitory that night. This was partly because he didn't think he could stand Fred and George singing, "His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad" one more time, and partly because he wanted to examine Riddle's diary again, and knew that Ron thought he was wasting his time.

Harry sat on his four-poster and flicked through the blank pages, not one of which had a trace of scarlet ink on it. Then he pulled a new bottle out of his bedside cabinet, dipped his quill into it, and dropped a blot onto the first page of the diary.

The ink shone brightly on the paper for a second and then, as though it was being sucked into the page, vanished. Excited, Harry loaded up his quill a second time and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter."

The words shone momentarily on the page and they, too, sank without trace. Then, at last, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written.

"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?"

These words, too, faded away, but not before Harry had started to scribble back.

"Someone tried to flush it down a toilet."

He waited eagerly for Riddle's reply.

"Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read. "

"What do you mean?" Harry scrawled, blotting the page in his excitement.

240

"I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "

"That's where I am now," Harry wrote quickly. "I'm at Hogwarts, and horrible stuff's been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

His heart was hammering. Riddle's reply came quickly, his writing becoming untidier, as though he was hurrying to tell all he knew.

"Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the person who opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the Headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned. "

Harry nearly upset his ink bottle in his hurry to write back.

"It's happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who's behind them. Who was it last time?"

"I can show you, if you like," came Riddle's reply. "You don't have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night when I caught him. "

Harry hesitated, his quill suspended over the diary. What did Riddle mean? How could he be taken inside somebody else's memory? He glanced nervously at the door to the dormitory, which was

241

growing dark. When he looked back at the diary, he saw fresh words forming.

"Let me show you. "

Harry paused for a fraction of a second and then wrote two letters.

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The pages of the diary began to blow as though caught in a high wind, stopping halfway through the month of June. Mouth hanging open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a miniscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow.

He felt his feet hit solid ground, and stood, shaking, as the blurred shapes around him came suddenly into focus.

He knew immediately where he was. This circular room with the sleeping portraits was Dumbledore's office - but it wasn't Dumbledore who was sitting behind the desk. A wizened, fraillooking wizard, bald except for a few wisps of white hair, was reading a letter by candlelight. Harry had never seen this man before.

"I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't mean to butt in -"

But the wizard didn't look up. He continued to read, frowning slightly. Harry drew nearer to his desk and stammered, "Er - I'll just go, shall I?"

Still the wizard ignored him. He didn't seem even to have heard him. Thinking that the wizard might be deaf, Harry raised his voice.

242

"Sorry I disturbed you. I'll go now," he half-shouted.

The wizard folded up the letter with a sigh, stood up, walked past Harry without glancing at him, and went to draw the curtains at his window.

The sky outside the window was ruby-red; it seemed to be sunset. The wizard went back to the desk, sat down, and twiddled his thumbs, watching the door.

Harry looked around the office. No Fawkes the phoenix - no whirring silver contraptions. This was Hogwarts as Riddle had known it, meaning that this unknown wizard was Headmaster, not Dumbledore, and he, Harry, was little more than a phantom, completely invisible to the people of fifty years ago.

There was a knock on the office door.

"Enter," said the old wizard in a feeble voice.

A boy of about sixteen entered, taking off his pointed hat. A silver prefect's badge was glinting on his chest. He was much taller than Harry, but he, too, had jet-black hair.

"Ah, Riddle," said the Headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?" said Riddle. He looked nervous.

"Sit down," said Dippet. "I've just been reading the letter you sent me.

"Oh," said Riddle. He sat down, gripping his hands together very tightly.

"My dear boy," said Dippet kindly, "I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?"

"No," said Riddle at once. "I'd much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that - to that -"

* 243*

"You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?" said Dippet curiously.

"Yes, sir," said Riddle, reddening slightly.

"You are Muggle-born?"

"Half-blood, sir," said Riddle. "Muggle father, witch mother."

"And are both your parents -?"

"My mother died just after I was born, sir. They told me at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me - Tom after my father, Marvolo after my grandfather."

Dipper clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"The thing is, Tom," he sighed, "Special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances"

"You mean all these attacks, sir?" said Riddle, and Harry's heart leapt, and he moved closer, scared of missing anything.

"Precisely," said the headmaster. "My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy ... the death of that poor little girl You will be safer by far at your orphanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the er - source of all this unpleasantness"

Riddle's eyes had widened.

"Sir - if the person was caught - if it all stopped -"

"What do you mean?" said Dipper with a squeak in his voice, sitting up in his chair. "Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?"

"No, sir," said Riddle quickly.

But Harry was sure it was the same sort of "no" that he himself had given Dumbledore.

244

Dipper sank back, looking faintly disappointed.

"You may go, Tom

Riddle slid off his chair and slouched out of the room. Harry followed him.

Down the moving spiral staircase they went, emerging next to the gargoyle in the darkening corridor. Riddle stopped, and so did Harry, watching him. Harry could tell that Riddle was doing some serious thinking. He was biting his lip, his forehead furrowed.

Then, as though he had suddenly reached a decision, he hurried off, Harry gliding noiselessly behind him. They didn't see another person until they reached the entrance hall, when a tall wizard with long, sweeping auburn hair and a beard called to Riddle from the marble staircase.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry gaped at the wizard. He was none other than a fifty-year-younger Dumbledore.

"I had to see the headmaster, sir," said Riddle.

"Well, hurry off to bed," said Dumbledore, giving Riddle exactly the kind of penetrating stare Harry knew so well. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since . . ."

He sighed heavily, bade Riddle good night, and strode off. Riddle watched him walk out of sight and then, moving quickly, headed straight down the stone steps to the dungeons, with Harry in hot pursuit.

But to Harry's disappointment, Riddle led him not into a hidden passageway or a secret tunnel but to the very dungeon in which Harry had Potions with Snape. The torches hadn't been lit, and when Riddle pushed the door almost closed, Harry could only just

*2 45 *

see him, standing stock-still by the door, watching the passage outside.

It felt to Harry that they were there for at least an hour. All he could see was the figure of Riddle at the door, staring through the crack, waiting like a statue. And just when Harry had stopped feeling expectant and tense and started wishing he could return to the present, he heard something move beyond the door.

Someone was creeping along the passage. He heard whoever it was pass the dungeon where he and Riddle were hidden. Riddle, quiet as a shadow, edged through the door and followed, Harry tiptoeing behind him, forgetting that he couldn't be heard.

For perhaps five minutes they followed the footsteps, until Riddle stopped suddenly, his head inclined in the direction of new noises. Harry heard a door creak open, and then someone speaking in a hoarse whisper.

"C'mon ... gotta get yeh outta here C'mon now ... in the box. . ."

There was something familiar about that voice

Riddle suddenly jumped around the corner. Harry stepped out behind him. He could see the dark outline of a huge boy who was crouching in front of an open door, a very large box next to it.

"Evening, Rubeus," said Riddle sharply.

The boy slammed the door shut and stood up.

"What yer doin' down here, Tom?"

Riddle stepped closer.

"It's all over," he said. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop."

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"N" at d'yeh -"

"I don't think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don't make good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and -"

"It never killed no one!" said the large boy, backing against the closed door. From behind him, Harry could hear a funny rustling and clicking.

"Come on, Rubeus," said Riddle, moving yet closer. "The dead girl's parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered

"It wasn't him!" roared the boy, his voice echoing in the dark passage. "He wouldn't! He never!"

"Stand aside," said Riddle, drawing out his wand.

His spell lit the corridor with a sudden flaming light. The door behind the large boy flew open with such force it knocked him into the wall opposite. And out of it came something that made Harry let out a long, piercing scream unheard by anyone

A vast, low-slung, hairy body and a tangle of black legs; a gleam of many eyes and a pair of razor-sharp pincers - Riddle raised his wand again, but he was too late. The thing bowled him over as it scuttled away, tearing up the corridor and out of sight. Riddle scrambled to his feet, looking after it; he raised his wand, but the huge boy leapt on him, seized his wand, and threw him back down, yelling, "NOOOOOO!"

The scene whirled, the darkness became complete; Harry felt himself falling and, with a crash, he landed spread-eagled on his four-poster in the Gryffindor dormitory, Riddle's diary lying open on his stomach.

24 7

Before he had had time to regain his breath, the dormitory door opened and Ron came in.

"There you are," he said.

Harry sat up. He was sweating and shaking.

"What's up?" said Ron, looking at him with concern.

"It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty

years ago."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always known that Hagrid had an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures. During their first year at Hogwarts he had tried to raise a dragon in his little wooden house, and it would be a long time before they forgot the giant, three-headed dog he'd christened "Fluffy." And if, as a boy, Hagrid had heard that a monster was hidden somewhere in the castle, Harry was sure he'd have gone to any lengths for a glimpse of it. He'd probably thought it was a shame that the monster had been cooped up so long, and thought it deserved the chance to stretch its many legs; Harry could just imagine the thirteen-year-old Hagrid trying to fit a leash and collar on it. But he was equally certain that Hagrid would never have meant to kill anybody.

Harry half wished he hadn't found out how to work Riddle's diary. Again and again Ron and Hermione made him recount what

he'd seen, until he was heartily sick of telling them and sick of the long, circular conversations that followed.

"Riddle might have got the wrong person," said Hermione. "Maybe it was some other monster that was attacking people"

"How many monsters d'you think this place can hold?" Ron asked dully.

"We always knew Hagrid had been expelled," said Harry miserably. "And the attacks must've stopped after Hagrid was kicked out. Otherwise, Riddle wouldn't have got his award."

Ron tried a different tack.

"Riddle does sound like Percy - who asked him to squeal on Hagrid, anyway?"

"But the monster had killed someone, Ron," said Hermione.

"And Riddle was going to go back to some Muggle orphanage if they closed Hogwarts," said Harry. "I don't blame him for wanting to stay here

"You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn't you, Harry?"

"He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent," said Harry quickly.

The three of them fell silent. After a long pause, Hermione voiced the knottiest question of all in a hesitant voice.

"Do you think we should go and ask Hagrid about it all?"

"That'd be a cheerful visit," said Ron. "Hello, Hagrid. Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?"

In the end, they decided that they would not say anything to Hagrid unless there was another attack, and as more and more days went by with no whisper from the disembodied voice, they became

hopeful that they would never need to talk to him about why he had been expelled. It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everybody seemed to think that the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Peeves had finally got bored of his "Oh, Potter, you rotter" song, Ernie Macmillan asked Harry quite politely to pass a bucket of leaping toadstools in Herbology one day, and in March several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in greenhouse three. This made Professor Sprout very happy.

"The moment they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're fully mature," she told Harry. "Then we'll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing."

The second years were given something new to think about during their Easter holidays. The time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter that Hermione, at least, took very seriously.

"it could affect our whole future," she told Harry and Ron as they pored over lists of new subjects, marking them with checks.

"I just want to give up Potions," said Harry.

"We can't," said Ron gloomily. "We keep all our old subjects, or I'd've ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"But that's very important!" said Hermione, shocked.

"Not the way Lockhart teaches it," said Ron. "I haven't learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose."

Neville Longbottom had been sent letters from all the witches and wizards in his family, all giving him different advice on what to choose. Confused and worried, he sat reading the subject lists with

his tongue poking out, asking people whether they thought Arithmancy sounded more difficult than the study of Ancient Runes. Dean Thomas, who, like Harry, had grown up with Muggles, ended up closing his eyes and jabbing his wand at the list, then picking the subjects it landed on. Hermione took nobody's advice but signed up for everything.

Harry smiled grimly to himself at the thought of what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would say if he tried to discuss his career in wizardry with them. Not that he didn't get any guidance: Percy Weasley was eager to share his experience.

"Depends where you want to go, Harry," he said. "It's never too early to think about the future, so I'd recommend Divination. People say Muggle Studies is a soft option, but I personally think wizards should have a thorough understanding of the non-magical community, particularly if they're thinking of working in close contact with them - look at my father, he has to deal with Muggle business all the time. My brother Charlie was always more of an outdoor type, so he went for Care of Magical Creatures. Play to your strengths, Harry."

But the only thing Harry felt he was really good at was Quidditch. In the end, he chose the same new subjects as Ron, feeling that if he was lousy at them, at least he'd have someone friendly to help him.

Gryffindor's next Quidditch match would be against Hufflepuff. Wood was insisting on team practices every night after dinner, so that Harry barely had time for anything but Quidditch and homework. However, the training sessions were getting better, or at least

drier, and the evening before Saturday's match he went up to his dormitory to drop off his broomstick feeling Gryffindor's chances for the Quidditch cup had never been better.

But his cheerful mood didn't last long. At the top of the stairs to the dormitory, he met Neville Longbottom, who was looking frantic.

"Harry - I don't know who did it - I just found -"

Watching Harry fearfully, Neville pushed open the door.

The contents of Harry's trunk had been thrown everywhere. His cloak lay ripped on the floor. The bedclothes had been pulled off his four-poster and the drawer had been pulled out of his bedside cabinet, the contents strewn over the mattress.

Harry walked over to the bed, open-mouthed, treading on a few loose pages of *Travels with Trolls*. As he and Neville pulled the blankets back onto his bed, Ron, Dean, and Seamus came in. Dean swore loudly.

"What happened, Harry?"

"No idea," said Harry. But Ron was examining Harry's robes. All the pockets were hanging out.

"Someone's been looking for something," said Ron. "Is there anything missing?"

Harry started to pick up all his things and throw them into his trunk. It was only as he threw the last of the Lockhart books back into it that he realized what wasn't there.

"Riddle's diary's gone," he said in an undertone to Ron.

"What?"

Harry jerked his head toward the dormitory door and Ron followed him out. They hurried down to the Gryffindor common

room, which was half-empty, and joined Hermione, who was sitting alone, reading a book called *Ancient Runes Made Easy*.

Hermione looked aghast at the news.

"But - only a Gryffindor could have stolen - nobody else knows our password -"

"Exactly," said Harry.

They woke the next day to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze.

"Perfect Quidditch conditions!" said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team's plates with scrambled eggs.

"Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast."

Harry had been staring down the packed Gryffindor table, wondering if the new owner of Riddle's diary was right in front of his eyes. Hermione had been urging him to report the robbery, but Harry didn't like the idea. He'd have to tell a teacher all about the diary, and how many people knew why Hagrid had been expelled fifty years ago? He didn't want to be the one who brought it all up again.

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and collect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry's growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again

"Kill this time ... let me rip ... tear. . ."

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm.

"The voice!" said Harry, -looking over his shoulder. "I just heard it again - didn't you?"

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a hand to her forehead.

"Harry - I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

And she sprinted away, up the stairs.

"What does she understand?" said Harry distractedly, still looking around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Loads more than I do," said Ron, shaking his head.

"But why's she got to go to the library?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," said Ron, shrugging. "When in doubt, go to the library."

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talking loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

"You'd better get moving," said Ron. "It's nearly eleven - the match -"

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goal posts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGonagall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been cancelled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play - the cup

Gryffindor -"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone:

"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron detach himself from the complaining crowd; he came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too, Weasley

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being canceled; others looked worried. Harry and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There has been another attack ... another double attack."

Harry's insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered. .

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a fifth-year girl with long, curly hair. Harry recognized her as the Ravenclaw they'd accidentally asked for directions to the Slytherin common room. And on the bed next to her was

"Hermione!" Ron groaned.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

"They were found near the library," said Professor McGonagall. "I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them

She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Professor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case.

"All students will return to their House common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment

from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, "I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward."

She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

"That's two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff," said the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. "Haven't any of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn't it obvious all this stuff's coming from Slytherin? The Heir of Slytherin, the monster of Slytherin - why don't they just chuck all the Slytherins out?" he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn't seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

"Percy's in shock," George told Harry quietly. "That Ravenclaw girl - Penelope Clearwater - she's a prefect. I don't think he thought the monster would dare attack a prefect."

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn't seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. And if the culprit wasn't caught soon, he was looking at a lifetime back with the Dursleys. Tom Riddle had turned Hagrid in because he was faced with the prospect of a Muggle orphanage if the school closed. Harry now knew exactly how he had felt.

"What're we going to do?" said Ron quietly in Harry's ear. "D'you think they suspect Hagrid?"

"We've got to go and talk to him," said Harry, making up his mind. "I can't believe it's him this time, but if he set the monster loose last time he'll know how to get inside the Chamber of Secrets, and that's a start."

"But McGonagall said we've got to stay in our tower unless we're in class -"

"I think," said Harry, more quietly still, "it's time to get my dad's old cloak out again."

Harry had inherited) ust one thing from his father: a long and sil very Invisibility Cloak. It was their only chance of sneaking out of the school to visit Hagrid without anyone knowing about it. They went to bed at the usual time, waited until Neville, Dean, and Sea mus had stopped discussing the Chamber of Secrets and finally fallen asleep, then got up, dressed again, and threw the cloak over themselves.

The journey through the dark and deserted castle corridors wasn't enjoyable. Harry, who had wandered the castle at night several times before, had never seen it so crowded after sunset. Teachers, prefects, and ghosts were marching the corridors in pairs, staring around for any unusual activity. Their Invisibility Cloak didn't stop them making any noise, and there was a particularly tense moment when Ron stubbed his toe only yards from the spot where Snape stood standing guard. Thankfully, Snape sneezed at almost exactly the moment Ron swore. It was with relief that they reached the oak front doors and eased them open.

It was a clear, starry night. They hurried toward the lit windows of Hagrid's house and pulled off the cloak only when they were right outside his front door.

Seconds after they had knocked, Hagrid flung it open. They found themselves face-to-face with him aiming a crossbow at them. Fang

the boarhound barked loudly behind him.

"Oh," he said, lowering the weapon and staring at them. "What're you two doin' here?"

"What's that for?" said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

"Nothin' - nothin' - " Hagrid muttered. "I've bin expectin' doesn't matter - Sit down - I'll make tea -"

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

"Are you okay, Hagrid?" said Harry. "Did you hear about Hermione?"

"Oh, I heard, all righ'," said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.

He kept glancing nervously at the windows. He poured them both large mugs of boiling water (he had forgotten to add tea bags) and was just putting a slab of fruitcake on a plate when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hagrid dropped the fruitcake. Harry and Ron exchanged panicstricken looks, then threw the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves and retreated into a corner. Hagrid checked that they were hidden, seized his crossbow, and flung open his door once more.

"Good evening, Hagrid."

It was Dumbledore. He entered, looking deadly serious, and was followed by a second, very odd-looking man.

The stranger had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a

scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

"That's Dad's boss!" Ron breathed. "Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic!"

Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

Hagrid had gone pale and sweaty. He dropped into one of his chairs and looked from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge.

"Bad business, Hagrid," said Fudge in rather clipped tones. "Very bad business. Had to come. Four attacks on Muggle-borns. Things've gone far enough. Ministry's got to act."

"I never," said Hagrid, looking imploringly at Dumbledore. "You know I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir -"

"I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence," said Dumbledore, frowning at Fudge.

"Look, Albus," said Fudge, uncomfortably. "Hagrid's record's against him. Ministry's got to do something - the school governors have been in touch -"

"Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were full of a fire Harry had never seen before.

"Look at it from my point of view," said Fudge, fidgeting with his bowler. "I'm under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing something. If it turns out it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be back and no more said. But I've got to take him. Got to. Wouldn't be doing my duty -"

"Take me?" said Hagrid, who was trembling. "Take me where?"

"For a short stretch only," said Fudge, not meeting Hagrid's eyes. "Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you'll be let out with a full apology -"

"Not Azkaban?" croaked Hagrid.

Before Fudge could answer, there was another loud rap on the door.

Dumbledore answered it. It was Harry's turn for an elbow in the ribs; he'd let out an audible gasp.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy strode into Hagrid's hut, swathed in a long black traveling cloak, smiling a cold and satisfied smile. Fang started to growl.

"Already here, Fudge," he said approvingly. "Good, good. . ."

"What're you doin' here?" said Hagrid furiously. "Get outta my house!"

"My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in being inside your - er - d'you call this a house?" said Lucius Malfoy, sneering as he looked around the small cabin. "I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here."

"And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?" said Dumbledore. He spoke politely, but the fire was still blazing in his blue eyes.

"Dreadful thing, Dumbledore," said Malfoy lazily, taking out a long roll of parchment, "but the governors feel it's time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension - you'll find all twelve signatures on it. I'm afraid we feel you're losing your touch. How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn't it? At this rate, there'll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an awful loss that would be to the school."

"Oh, now, see here, Lucius," said Fudge, looking alarmed, "Dumbledore suspended - no, no - last thing we want just now

262

"The appointment - or suspension - of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. "And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks -"

"See here, Malfoy, if Dumbledore can't stop them," said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, "I mean to say, who can?"

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. "But as all twelve of us have voted -"

Hagrid leapt to his feet, his shaggy black head grazing the ceiling.

'An' how many did yeh have ter threaten an' blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy, eh?" he roared.

"Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid," said Mr. Malfoy. "I would advise you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. They won't like it at all."

"Yeh can' take Dumbledore!" yelled Hagrid, making Fang the boarhound cower and whimper in his basket. "Take him away, an' the Muggle-borns won' stand a chance! There'll be killin' next!"

"Calm yourself, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply. He looked at Lucius Malfoy.

"If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside -"

"But -" stuttered Fudge.

"No!" growled Hagrid.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones.

"However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will

* 26\$*

ummer was creeping over the grounds around the castle; sky and lake alike turned periwinkle blue and flowers large as cabbages burst into bloom in the greenhouses. But with no Hagrid visible from the castle windows, striding the grounds with Fang at his heels, the scene didn't look right to Harry; no better, in fact, than the inside of the castle, where things were so horribly wrong.

Harry and Ron had tried to visit Hermione, but visitors were now barred from the hospital wing.

"We're taking no more chances," Madam Pomfrey told them severely through a crack in the infirmary door. "No, I'm sorry, there's every chance the attacker might come back to finish these people off . . ."

With Dumbledore gone, fear had spread as never before, so that the sun warming the castle walls outside seemed to stop at the mullioned windows. There was barely a face to be seen in the school

* 265*

that didn't look worried and tense, and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural and was quickly stifled.

Harry constantly repeated Dumbledore's final words to himself "I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me... Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it." But what good were these words? Who exactly were they supposed to ask for help, when everyone was just as confused and scared as they were?

Hagrid's hint about the spiders was far easier to understand the trouble was, there didn't seem to be a single spider left in the castle to follow. Harry looked everywhere he went, helped (rather reluctantly) by Ron. They were hampered, of course, by the fact that they weren't allowed to wander off on their own but had to move around the castle in a pack with the other Gryffindors. Most of their fellow students seemed glad that they were being shepherded from class to class by teachers, but Harry found it very irksome.

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn't realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore," he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. "I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever

266

had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't want the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione's empty seat and cauldron.

"Sir," said Malfoy loudly. "Sir, why don't you apply for the headmaster's job?"

"Now, now, Malfoy," said Snape, though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile. "Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right," said Malfoy, smirking. "I expect you'd have Father's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job - I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir -"

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.

"I'm quite surprised the Mudbloods haven't all packed their bags by now," Malfoy went on. "Bet you five Galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn't Granger -"

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; at Malfoy's last words, Ron had leapt off his stool, and in the scramble to collect bags and books, his attempts to reach Malfoy went unnoticed.

"Let me at him," Ron growled as Harry and Dean hung onto his arms. "I don't care, I don't need my wand, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands -"

"Hurry up, I've got to take you all to Herbology," barked Snape over the class's heads, and off they marched, with Harry, Ron, and Dean bringing up the rear, Ron still trying to get loose. It was only

* 261*

safe to let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the castle and they were making their way across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses.

The Herbology class was very subdued; there were now two missing from their number, Justin and Hermione.

Professor Sprout set them all to work pruning the Abyssinian Shrivelfigs. Harry went to tip an armful of withered stalks onto the compost heap and found himself face-to-face with Ernie Macmillan. Ernie took a deep breath and said, very formally, "I just want to say, Harry, that I'm sorry I ever suspected you. I know you'd never attack Hermione Granger, and I apologize for all the stuff I said. We're all in the same boat now, and, well -"

He held out a pudgy hand, and Harry shook it.

Ernie and his friend Hannah came to work at the same Shrivelfig as Harry and Ron.

"That Draco Malfoy character," said Ernie, breaking off dead twigs, "he seems very pleased about all this, doesn't he? D'you know, I think he might be Slytherin's heir."

"That's clever of you," said Ron, who didn't seem to have forgiven Ernie as readily as Harry.

"Do you think it's Malfoy, Harry?" Ernie asked.

"No," said Harry, so firmly that Ernie and Hannah stared.

A second later, Harry spotted something.

Several large spiders were scuttling over the ground on the other side of the glass, moving in an unnaturally straight line as though taking the shortest route to a prearranged meeting. Harry hit Ron over the hand with his pruning shears.

"Ouch! What're you -"

Harry pointed out the spiders, following their progress with his eyes screwed up against the sun.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron, trying, and failing, to look pleased. "But we can't follow them now -"

Ernie and Hannah were listening curiously.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he focused on the spiders. If they pursued their fixed course, there could be no doubt about where they would end up.

"Looks like they're heading for the Forbidden Forest"

And Ron looked even unhappier about that.

At the end of the lesson Professor Sprout escorted the class to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Harry and Ron lagged behind the others so they could talk out of earshot.

"We'll have to use the Invisibility Cloak again," Harry told Ron. "We can take Fang with us. He's used to going into the forest with Hagrid, he might be some help."

"Right," said Ron, who was twirling his wand nervously in his fingers. "Er - aren't there - aren't there supposed to be werewolves in the forest?" he added as they took their usual places at the back of Lockhart's classroom.

Preferring not to answer that question, Harry said, "There are good things in there, too. The centaurs are all right, and the unicorns ..."

Ron had never been into the Forbidden Forest before. Harry had entered it only once and had hoped never to do so again.

Lockhart bounded into the room and the class stared at him. Every other teacher in the place was looking grimmer than usual, but Lockhart appeared nothing short of buoyant.

2 69

"Come now," he cried, beaming around him. "Why all these long

faces?"

People swapped exasperated looks, but nobody answered.

"Don't you people realize," said Lockhart, speaking slowly, as though they were all a bit dim, "the danger has passed! The culprit has been taken away -"

"Says who?" said Dean Thomas loudly.

"My dear young man, the Minister of Magic wouldn't have taken Hagrid if he hadn't been one hundred percent sure that he was guilty," said Lockhart, in the tone of someone explaining that one and one made two.

"Oh, yes he would," said Ron, even more loudly than Dean.

"I flatter myself I know a touch more about Hagrid's arrest than you do, Mr. Weasley," said Lockhart in a self-satisfied tone.

Ron started to say that he didn't think so, somehow, but stopped in midsentence when Harry kicked him hard under the desk.

"We weren't there, remember?" Harry muttered.

But Lockhart's disgusting cheeriness, his hints that he had always thought Hagrid was no good, his confidence that the whole business was now at an end, irritated Harry so much that he yearned to throw Gadding with Ghouls right in Lockhart's stupid face. Instead he contented himself with scrawling a note to Ron: Let's do it tonight.

Ron read the message, swallowed hard, and looked sideways at the empty seat usually filled by Hermione. The sight seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he nodded.

The Gryffindor common room was always very crowded these days, because from six o'clock onward the Gryffindors had no -

270

where else to go. They also had plenty to talk about, with the result that the common room often didn't empty until past midnight.

Harry went to get the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk right after dinner, and spent the evening sitting on it, waiting for the room to clear. Fred and George challenged Harry and Ron to a few games of Exploding Snap, and Ginny sat watching them, very subdued in Hermione's usual chair. Harry and Ron kept losing on purpose, trying to finish the games quickly, but even so, it was well past midnight when Fred, George, and Ginny finally went to bed.

Harry and Ron waited for the distant sounds of two dormitory doors closing before seizing the cloak, throwing it over themselves, and climbing through the portrait hole.

It was another difficult journey through the castle, dodging all the teachers. At last they reached the entrance hall, slid back the lock on the oak front doors, squeezed between them, trying to stop any creaking, and stepped out into the moonlit grounds.

"Course," said Ron abruptly as they strode across the black grass, "we might get to the forest and find there's nothing to follow. Those spiders might not've been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but. . ."

His voice trailed away hopefully.

They reached Hagrid's house, sad and sorry-looking with its blank windows. When Harry pushed the door open, Fang went mad with joy at the sight of them. Worried he might wake everyone at the castle with his deep, booming barks, they hastily fed him treacle fudge from a tin on the mantelpiece, which glued his teeth together.

Harry left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid's table. There would be no need for it in the pitch-dark forest.

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"C'mon, Fang, we're going for a walk," said Harry, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the forest, and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Harry took out his wand, murmured, "Lumos!" and a tiny light appeared at the end of it, just enough to let them watch the path for

signs of spiders.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "Id light mine, too, but you know - it'd probably blow up or something

Harry tapped Ron on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the trees.

"Okay," Ron sighed as though resigned to the worst, "I'm ready. Let's go."

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the forest. By the glow of Harry's wand, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked behind them for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and Harry's wand shone alone in the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Harry paused, trying to see where the spiders were going, but everything outside his little sphere of *light was pitch-black. He had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Hagrid advising him not to leave the forest path last time he'd been in here. But Hagrid was miles away now, probably sitting in a cell in Azkaban, and he had also said to follow the spiders.

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Something wet touched Harry's hand and he jumped backward, crushing Rods foot, but it was only Fang's nose.

"What d'you reckon?" Harry said to Ron, whose eyes he could just make out, reflecting the light from his wand.

"We've come this far," said Ron.

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees. They couldn't move very quickly now; there were tree roots and stumps in their way, barely visible in the near blackness. Harry could feel Fang's hot breath on his hand. More than once, they had to stop,

so that Harry could crouch down and find the spiders in the wandlight.

They walked for what seemed like at least half an hour, their robes snagging on low-slung branches and brambles. After a while, they noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping downward, though the trees were as thick as ever.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making both Harry and Ron jump out of their skins.

"What?" said Ron loudly, looking around into the pitch-dark, and gripping Harry's elbow very hard.

"There's something moving over there," Harry breathed. "Listen ... sounds like something big

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

"Oh, no," said Ron. "Oh, no, oh, no, oh -"

"Shut up," said Harry frantically. "It'll hear you."

"Hear me?" said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. "It's already heard Fang!"

The darkness seemed to be pressing on their eyeballs as they

* 273*

stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange rumbling noise and then silence.

"What d'you think it's doing?" said Harry.

"Probably getting ready to pounce," said Ron.

They waited, shivering, hardly daring to move.

"D'you think it's gone?" Harry whispered.

"Dunno -"

Then, to their right, came a sudden blaze of light, so bright in the darkness that both of them flung up their hands to shield their eyes. Fang yelped and tried to run, but got lodged in a tangle of thorns and yelped even louder.

"Harry!" Ron shouted, his voice breaking with relief "Harry, it's our car!"

"What?"

"Come on!"

Harry blundered after Ron toward the light, stumbling and tripping, and a moment later they had emerged into a clearing.

Mr. Weasley's car was standing, empty, in the middle of a circle of thick trees under a roof of dense branches, its headlights ablaze. As Ron walked, open-mouthed, toward it, it moved slowly toward him, exactly like a large, turquoise dog greeting its owner.

"It's been here all the time!" said Ron delightedly, walking around the car. "Look at it. The forest's turned it wild"

The sides of the car were scratched and smeared with mud. Apparently it had taken to trundling around the forest on its own. Fang didn't seem at all keen on it; he kept close to Harry, who could feel him quivering. His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his wand back into his robes.

214

"And we thought it was going to attack us!" said Ron, leaning against the car and patting it. "I wondered where it had gone!"

Harry squinted around on the floodlit ground for signs of more spiders, but they had all scuttled away from the glare of the headlights.

"We've lost the trail," he said. "C'mon, let's go and find them."

Ron didn't speak. He didn't move. His eyes were fixed on a point some ten feet above the forest floor, right behind Harry. His face was

livid with terror.

Harry didn't even have time to turn around. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something long and hairy seize him around the middle and lift him off the ground, so that he was hanging facedown. Struggling, terrified, he heard more clicking, and saw Ron's legs leave the ground, too, heard Fang whimpering and howling - next moment, he was being swept away into the dark trees.

Head hanging, Harry saw that what had hold of him was marching on six immensely long, hairy legs, the front two clutching him tightly below a pair of shining black pincers. Behind him, he could hear another of the creatures, no doubt carrying Ron. They were moving into the very heart of the forest. Harry could hear Fang fighting to free himself from a third monster, whining loudly, but Harry couldn't have yelled even if he had wanted to; he seemed to have left his voice back with the car in the clearing.

He never knew how long he was in the creature's clutches; he only knew that the darkness suddenly lifted enough for him to see that the leaf-strewn ground was now swarming with spiders. Craning his neck sideways, he realized that they had reached the ridge of

21\$

a vast hollow, a hollow that had been cleared of trees, so that the stars shone brightly onto the worst scene he had ever laid eyes on.

Spiders. Not tiny spiders like those surging over the leaves below. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic. The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope toward a misty, domed web in the very center of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, clicking their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load.

Harry fell to the ground on all fours as the spider released him. Ron and Fang thudded down next to him. Fang wasn't howling anymore, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron looked exactly like Harry felt. His mouth was stretched wide in a kind of silent scream and his eyes were popping.

Harry suddenly realized that the spider that had dropped him was

saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his pincers with every word he spoke.

"Aragog!" it called. "Aragog!"

And from the middle of the misty, domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was gray in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pincer head was milky white. He was blind.

"What is it?" he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

"Men," clicked the spider who had caught Harry.

"Is it Hagrid?" said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

"Strangers," clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

"Kill them," clicked Aragog fretfully. "I was sleeping

"We're friends of Hagrid's," Harry shouted. His heart seemed to have left his chest to pound in his throat.

216

Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused.

"Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before," he said slowly.

"Hagrid's in trouble," said Harry, breathing very fast. "That's why we've come."

"In trouble?" said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. "But why has he sent you?"

Harry thought of getting to his feet but decided against it; he didn't think his legs would support him. So he spoke from the ground, as calmly as he could.

"They think,, up at the school, that Hagrid's been setting a a - something on students. They've taken him to Azkaban."

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hollow the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders; it was like applause, except applause didn't usually make Harry feel sick with fear.

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"And you ... you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?" said Harry, who could feel cold sweat on his forehead.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid

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is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness

Harry summoned what remained of his courage.

"So you never - never attacked anyone?"

"Never," croaked the old spider. "It would have been my instinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet

"But then ... Do you know what did kill that girl?" said Harry.
"Because whatever it is, it's back and attacking people again -"

His words were drowned by a loud outbreak of clicking and the rustling of many long legs shifting angrily; large black shapes shifted all around him.

"The thing that lives in the castle," said Aragog, "is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school."

"What is it?" said Harry urgently.

More loud clicking, more rustling; the spiders seemed to be closing in.

"We do not speak of it!" said Aragog fiercely. "We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times."

Harry didn't want to press the subject, not with the spiders

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pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to be tired of tamng. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly toward Harry and Ron.

"We'll just go, then," Harry called desperately to Aragog, hearing leaves rustling behind him.

"Go?" said Aragog slowly. "I think not

"But - but -"

"My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst. Good-bye, friend of Hagrid."

Harry spun around. Feet away, towering above him, was a solid wall of spiders, clicking, their many eyes gleaming in their ugly black heads.

Even as he reached for his wand, Harry knew it was no good, there were too many of them, but as he tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the

hollow.

Mr. Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horn screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown onto their backs, their endless legs waving in the air. The car screeched to a halt in front of Harry and Ron and the doors flew open.

"Get Fang!" Harry yelled, diving into the front seat; Ron seized the boarhound around the middle and threw him, yelping, into the back of the car - the doors slammed shut - Ron didn't touch the accelerator but the car didn't need him; the engine roared and they were off, hitting more spiders. They sped up the slope, out of the hollow, and they were soon crashing through the forest, branches

whipping the windows as the car wound its way cleverly through the widest gaps, following a path it obviously knew.

Harry looked sideways at Ron. His mouth was still open in the silent scream, but his eyes weren't popping anymore.

"Are you okay?"

Ron stared straight ahead, unable to speak.

They smashed their way through the undergrowth, Fang howling loudly in the back seat, and Harry saw the side mirror snap off as they squeezed past a large oak. After ten noisy, rocky minutes, the trees thinned, and Harry could again see patches of sky.

The car stopped so suddenly that they were nearly thrown into the windshield. They had reached the edge of the forest. Fang flung himself at the window in his anxiety to get out, and when Harry opened the door, he shot off through the trees to Hagrid's house, tail between his legs. Harry got out too, and after a minute or so, Ron seemed to regain the feeling in his limbs and followed, still stiff-necked and staring. Harry gave the car a grateful pat as it reversed back into the forest and disappeared from view.

Harry went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the Invisibility Cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. When Harry got outside again, he found Ron being violently sick in the pumpkin patch.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Harry.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're

280

made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, Id like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, throwing the cloak over Ron and prodding him in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort. Evidently, hatching Aragog in a cupboard wasn't his idea of being innocent.

As the castle loomed nearer Harry twitched the cloak to make sure their feet were hidden, then pushed the creaking front doors ajar. They walked carefully back across the entrance hall and up the marble staircase, holding their breath as they passed corridors where watchful sentries were walking. At last they reached the safety of the Gryffindor common room, where the fire had burned itself into glowing ash. They took off the cloak and climbed the winding stair to their dormitory.

Ron fell onto his bed without bothering to get undressed. Harry, however, didn't feel very sleepy. He sat on the edge of his fourposter, thinking hard about everything Aragog had said.

The creature that was lurking somewhere in the castle, he thought, sounded like a sort of monster Voldemort - even other monsters didn't want to name it. But he and Ron were no closer to finding out what it was, or how it Petrified its victims. Even Hagrid had never known what was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry swung his legs up onto his bed and leaned back against his pillows, watching the moon glinting at him through the tower window.

He couldn't see what else they could do. They had hit dead ends

281

everywhere. Riddle had caught the wrong person, the Heir of Slytherin had got off, and no one could tell whether it was the same person, or a different one, who had opened the Chamber this time. There was nobody else to ask. Harry lay down, still thinking about what Aragog had said.

He was becoming drowsy when what seemed like their very last hope occurred to him, and he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Ron," he hissed through the dark, "Ron -"

Ron woke with a yelp like Fang's, stared wildly around, and saw Harry.

"Ron -that girl who died. Aragog said she was found in a bathroom," said Harry, ignoring Neville's snufing snores from the corner. "What if she never left the bathroom? What if she's still there?"

Ron rubbed his eyes, frowning through the moonlight. And then he understood, too.

"You don't think - not Moaning Myrtle?"

A ll those times we were in that bathroom, and she was just three toilets away," said Ron bitterly at breakfast next day,

"and we could've asked her, and now. . ."

It had been hard enough trying to look for spiders. Escaping their teachers long enough to sneak into a girls' bathroom, the girls' bathroom, moreover, right next to the scene of the first attack, was going to be almost impossible.

But something happened in their first lesson, Transfiguration, that drove the Chamber of Secrets out of their minds for the first time in weeks. Ten minutes into the class, Professor McGonagall told them that their exams would start on the first of June, one week from today.

`Exams?" howled Seamus Finnigan. "We're still getting exams?"

There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville Longbottom's wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs on his desk. Professorr

28%

McGonagall restored it with a wave of her own wand, and turned, frowning, to Seamus.

"The whole point of keeping the school open at this time is for you to receive your education," she said sternly. "The exams will therefore take place as usual, and I trust you are all studying hard."

Studying hard! It had never occurred to Harry that there would be exams with the castle in this state. There was a great deal of mutinous muttering around the room, which made Professor McGonagall scowl even more darkly.

"Professor Dumbledore's instructions were to keep the school running as normally as possible, she said. "And that, I need hardly point out, means finding out how much you have learned this year.

Harry looked down at the pair of white rabbits he was supposed to be turning into slippers. What had he learned so far this year? He couldn't seem to think of anything that would be useful in an exam.

Ron looked as though he'd just been told he had to go and live in the Forbidden Forest.

"Can you imagine me taking exams with this?" he asked Harry, holding up his wand, which had just started whistling loudly.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made another announcement at breakfast.

"I have good news," she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!" squealed a girl at the Ravenclaw table.

284*

"Quidditch matches are back on!" roared Wood excitedly.

When the hubbub had subsided, Professor McGonagall said, "Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

There was an explosion of cheering. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and wasn't at all surprised to see that Draco Malfoy hadn't joined in. Ron, however, was looking happier than he'd looked in days.

"It won't matter that we never asked Myrtle, then!" he said to Harry. "Hermione'll probably have all the answers when they wake her up! Mind you, she'll go crazy when she finds out we've got exams in three days' time. She hasn't studied. It might be kinder to leave her where she is till they're over."

Just then, Ginny Weasley came over and sat down next to Ron. She looked tense and nervous, and Harry noticed that her hands were twisting in her lap.

"What's up?" said Ron, helping himself to more porridge.

Ginny didn't say anything, but glanced up and down the Gryffindor table with a scared look on her face that reminded Harry of someone, though he couldn't think who.

"Spit it out," said Ron, watching her.

Harry suddenly realized who Ginny looked like. She was rocking backward and forward slightly in her chair, exactly like Dobby did when he was teetering on the edge of revealing forbidden information.

"I've got to tell you something," Ginny mumbled, carefully not looking at Harry.

"What is it?" said Harry.

Ginny looked as though she couldn't find the right words.

"What?" said Ron.

Ginny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Harry leaned forward and spoke quietly, so that only Ginny and Ron could hear him.

"Is it something about the Chamber of Secrets? Have you seen something? Someone acting oddly?"

Ginny drew a deep breath and, at that precise moment, Percy Weasley appeared, looking tired and wan.

"If you've finished eating, I'll take that seat, Ginny. I'm starving, I've only just come off patrol duty."

Ginny jumped up as though her chair had just been electrified, gave Percy a fleeting, frightened look, and scampered away. Percy sat down and grabbed a mug from the center of the table.

"Percy!" said Ron angrily. "She was just about to tell us some-! thing important!"

Halfway through a gulp of tea, Percy choked.

"What sort of thing?" he said, coughing.

"I just asked her if she'd seen anything odd, and she started to say

"Oh - that - that's nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets," said Percy at once.

"How do you know?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, er, if you must know, Ginny, er, walked in on me the other day when I was - well, never mind - the point is, she spot

ted me doing something and I, um, I asked her not to mention it to anybody. I must say, I did think she'd keep her word. It's nothing, really, I'd just rather -"

Harry had never seen Percy look so uncomfortable.

"What were you doing, Percy?" said Ron, grinning. "Go on, tell us, we won't laugh."

Percy didn't smile back.

"Pass me those rolls, Harry, I'm starving."

Harry knew the whole mystery might be solved tomorrow without their help, but he wasn't about to pass up a chance to speak to Myrtle if it turned up - and to his delight it did, midmorning, when they were being led to History of Magic by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who had so often assured them that all danger had passed, only to be proved wrong right away, was now wholeheartedly convinced that it was hardly worth the trouble to see them safely down the corridors. His hair wasn't as sleek as usual; it seemed he had been up most of the night, patrolling the fourth floor.

"Mark my words," he said, ushering them around a corner. "The first words out of those poor Petrified people's mouths will be 'It was Hagrid.' Frankly, I'm astounded Professor McGonagall thinks all these security measures are necessary."

"(ti agree, sir," said Harry, making Ron drop his books in surprise.

"Thank you, Harry, said Lockhart graciously while they waited for a long line of Hufflepuffs to pass. "I mean, we teachers have quite enough to be getting on with, without walking students to classes and standing guard all night

"That's right," said Ron, catching on. "Why don't you leave us here, sir, we've only got one more corridor to go -"

"You know, Weasley, I think I will," said Lockhart. "I really should go and prepare my next class -"

And he hurried off.

"Prepare his class," Ron sneered after him. "Gone to curl his hair, more like."

They let the rest of the Gryffindors draw ahead of them, then darted down a side passage and hurried off toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But just as they were congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme

"Potter! Weasley! What are you doing?"

It was Professor McGonagall, and her mouth was the thinnest of thin lines.

"We were -we were-" Ron stammered. "We were going to - to go and see -"

"Hermione," said Harry. Ron and Professor McGonagall both looked at him.

"We haven't seen her for ages, Professor," Harry went on hurriedly, treading on Ron's foot, "and we thought we'd sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry -"

Professor McGonagall was still staring at him, and for a moment, Harry thought she was going to explode, but when she spoke, it was in a strangely croaky voice.

"Of course," she said, and Harry, amazed, saw a tear glistening in her beady eye. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been ... I quite understand. Yes,

Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Professor Binns where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

Harry and Ron walked away, hardly daring to believe that they'd avoided detention. As they turned the corner, they distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose.

"That," said Ron fervently, "was the best story you've ever come up with."

They had no choice now but to go to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey that they had Professor McGonagall's permission to visit Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly.

"There's just no point talking to a Petrified person," she said, and they had to admit she had a point when they'd taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn't have the faintest inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do.

"Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?" said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione's rigid face. "Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one'll ever know"

But Harry wasn't looking at Hermione's face. He was more interested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and bending closer, he saw that a piece of paper was scrunched inside her fist.

Making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere near, he pointed this out to Ron.

"TG and get it out," Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked Harry from Madam Pomfrey's view.

It was no easy task. Hermione's hand was clamped so tightly around the paper that Harry was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born

from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione's. Pipes.

It was as though somebody had just flicked a light on in his brain.

"Ron," he breathed. "This is it. This is the answer. The monster in the Chamber's a basilisk - a giant serpent! That why I've been hearing that voice all over the place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue"

Harry looked up at the beds around him.

"The basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died - because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin . . . Justin must've seen the basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die again . . . and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look around corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror - and -"

Rods jaw had dropped.

"And Mrs. Norris?" he whispered eagerly.

Harry thought hard, picturing the scene on the night of Halloween.

"The water. . ." he said slowly. "The flood from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection"

He scanned the page in his hand eagerly. The more he looked at it, the more it made sense.

`: . . The crowing of the rooster . . . is fatal to it"! he read aloud. "Hagrid's roosters were killed! The Heir of Slytherin didn't want one anywhere near the castle once the Chamber was opened! Spidersflee before it.! It all fits!"

"But how's the basilisk been getting around the place?" said Ron. "A giant snake . . . Someone would've seen. . ."

Harry, however, pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page.

"Pipes," he said. "Pipes . . . Ron, it's been using the plumbing. I've been hearing that voice inside the walls"

291*

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry's arm.

"The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!" he said hoarsely.

"What if it's a bathroom? What if it's in -"

`= Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, "said Harry.

They sat there, excitement coursing through them, hardly able to believe it.

"This means," said Harry, "I can't be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin's one, too. That's how he's been controlling the basilisk."

"What're we going to do?" said Ron, whose eyes were flashing.

"Should we go straight to McGonagall?"

"Let's go to the staff room," said Harry, jumping up. "She'll be there in ten minutes. It's nearly break."

They ran downstairs. Not wanting to be discovered hanging around in another corridor, they went straight into the deserted staff room. It was a large, paneled room full of dark, wooden chairs.

Harry and Ron paced around it, too excited to sit down.

But the bell to signal break never came.

Instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall's voice, magically magnified.

`All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please. "

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

"Not another attack? Not now?"

"What'll we do?" said Ron, aghast. "Go back to the dormitory?"
"No," said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers' cloaks. "In here. Let's hear what it's all about. Then we can tell them what we've found out."

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staff room door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

"It has happened," she told the silent staff room. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Professor Flitwick let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, "How can you be sure?"

"The Heir of Slytherin," said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, "left another message. Right underneath the first one. `Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever. '"

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

"Who is it?" said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley," said Professor McGonagall.

Harry felt Ron slide silently down onto the wardrobe floor beside him.

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," said Professor McGonagall. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said. . ."

The staffroom door banged open again. For one wild moment, Harry was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Lockhart, and he was beaming.

"So sorry - dozed off - what have I missed?"

He didn't seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Snape stepped forward.

"Just the man," he said. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

Lockhart blanched.

"That's right, Gilderoy," chipped in Professor Sprout. "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I - well, I -" sputtered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Professor Flitwick.

"D-did I? I don't recall -"

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Snape. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

"I - I really never - you may have misunderstood -"

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said Professor McGonagall. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome anymore. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin, he looked weak-chinned and feeble.

"V very well," he said. "I'll - I'll be in my office, getting getting ready."

And he left the room.

"Right," said Professor McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared,

"that's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

The teachers rose and left, one by one.

It was probably the worst day of Harry's entire life. He, Ron, Fred, and George sat together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, unable to say anything to each other. Percy wasn't there. He had gone to send an owl to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut himself up in his dormitory.

No afternoon ever lasted as long as that one, nor had Gryffindor Tower ever been so crowded, yet so quiet. Near sunset, Fred and George went up to bed, unable to sit there any longer.

"She knew something, Harry," said Ron, speaking for the first time since they had entered the wardrobe in the staff room. "That's why she was taken. It wasn't some stupid thing about Percy at all., She'd found out something about the Chamber of Secrets. That must be why she was -" Ron rubbed his eyes frantically. "I mean, she was a pure-blood. There can't be any other reason."

Harry could see the sun sinking, blood-red, below the skyline. This was the worst he had ever felt. If only there was something they could do. Anything.

"Harry" said Ron. "D'you think there's any chance at all she's not - you know ="

Harry didn't know what to say. He couldn't see how Ginny could still be alive.

"D'you know what?" said Ron. "I think we should go and see

295

Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He's going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it's a basilisk in there."

Because Harry couldn't think of anything else to do, and because he wanted to be doing something, he agreed. The Gryffindors around them were so miserable, and felt so sorry for the Weasleys, that nobody tried to stop them as they got up, crossed the room, and left through the portrait hole.

Darkness was falling as they walked down to Lockhart's office. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside it. They could hear scraping, thumps, and hurried footsteps.

Harry knocked and there was a sudden silence from inside. Then the door opened the tiniest crack and they saw one of Lockhart's eyes peering through it.

"Oh - Mr. Potter - Mr. Weasley -" he said, opening the door a bit wider. "I'm rather busy at the moment - if you would be quick -"

"Professor, we've got some information for you," said Harry. "We think it'll help you."

"Er - well - it's not terribly -" The side of Lockhart's face that they could see looked very uncomfortable. "I mean - well all right -"

He opened the door and they entered.

His office had been almost completely stripped. Two large trunks stood open on the floor. Robes, jade-green, lilac, midnightblue, had been hastily folded into one of them; books were jumbled untidily into the other. The photographs that had covered the walls were now crammed into boxes on the desk.

296

"Are you going somewhere?" said Harry.

"Er, well, yes," said Lockhart, ripping a life-size poster of himself from the back of the door as he spoke and starting to roll it up. "Urgent call - unavoidable - got to go -"

"What about my sister?" said Ron jerkily.

"Well, as to that - most unfortunate -" said Lockhart, avoiding their eyes as he wrenched open a drawer and started emptying the contents into a bag. "No one regrets more than I -"

"You're the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!" said Harry.
"You can't go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!"

"Well - I must say - when I took the job -" Lockhart muttered, now piling socks on top of his robes. "nothing in the job description - didn't expect -"

"You mean you're running away?" said Harry disbelievingly. "After all that stuff you did in your books -"

"Books can be misleading," said Lockhart delicately.

"You wrote them!" Harry shouted.

"My dear boy," said Lockhart, straightening up and frowning at Harry.
"Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a harelip. I mean, come on -"

"So you've just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?" said Harry incredulously.

"Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, "it's not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had

297

to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn't remember doing it. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's my Memory Charms. No, it's been a lot of work, Harry. It's not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you

have to be prepared for a long hard slog."

He banged the lids of his trunks shut and locked them.

"Let's see," he said. "I think that's everything. Yes. Only one thing left."

He pulled out his wand and turned to them.

"Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I'd never sell another book -"

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart had barely raised his, when Harry bellowed, "Expelliarmus!"

Lockhart was blasted backward, falling over his trunk; his wand flew high into the air; Ron caught it, and flung it out of the open window.

"Shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one," said Harry furiously, kicking Lockhart's trunk aside. Lockhart was looking up at him, feeble once more. Harry was still pointing his wand at him.

"What do you want me to do?" said Lockhart weakly. "I don't know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There's nothing I can do."

"You're in luck," said Harry, forcing Lockhart to his feet at wandpoint. "We think we know where it is. And what's inside it. Let's go."

298

They marched Lockhart out of his office and down the nearest stairs, along the dark corridor where the messages shone on the wall, to the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They sent Lockhart in first. Harry was pleased to see that he was shaking.

Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Harry. "What do you want this time?"

"To ask you how you died," said Harry.

Myrtle's whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish. "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then -" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. "I died."

"How?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Myrtle in hushed tones. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away" She looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" said Harry.

299

"Somewhere there," said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Ron hurried over to it. Lockhart was standing well back, a look of utter terror on his face.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it: Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

"That tap's never worked," said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

"Harry," said Ron. "Say something. Something in Parseltongue."

"But -" Harry thought hard. The only times he'd ever managed to

Parsetongue were when he'd been faced with a real snake. He stared hard at the tiny- engraving, trying to imagine it was real.

"Open up," he said.

He looked at Ron, who shook his head.

"English," he said.

Harry looked back at the snake, willing himself to believe it was alive. If he moved his head, the candlelight made it look as though it were moving.

"Open up," he said.

Except that the words weren't what he heard; a strange hissing had escaped him, and at once the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Ron gasp and looked up again. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

300

"I'm going down there," he said. .

He couldn't not go, not now they had found the entrance to the Chamber, not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive.

"Me too," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"Well, you hardly seem to need me," said Lockhart, with a shadow of his old smile. "I'll just -"

He put his hand on the door knob, but Ron and Harry both pointed their wands at him.

"You can go first," Ron snarled.

White-faced and wandless, Lockhart approached the opening.

"Boys," he said, his voice feeble. "Boys, what good will it do?"

Harry jabbed him in the back with his wand. Lockhart slid his legs into the pipe.

"I really don't think -" he started to say, but Ron gave him a push, and he slid out of sight. Harry followed quickly. He lowered himself slowly into the pipe, then let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. He could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and he knew that he was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. Behind him he could hear Ron, thudding slightly at the curves.

And then, just as he had begun to worry about what would happen when he hit the ground, the pipe leveled out, and he shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel large enough to stand in. Lockhart was getting to his

*301

feet a little ways away, covered in slime and white as a ghost. Harry stood aside as Ron came whizzing out of the pipe, too.

"We must be miles under the school," said Harry, his voice echoing in the black tunnel.

"Under the lake, probably," said Ron, squinting around at the dark, slimy walls.

All three of them turned to stare into the darkness ahead.

"Lumos!" Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. "C'mon," he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead.

Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight.

"Remember," Harry said quietly as they walked cautiously forward, "any sign of movement, close your eyes right away"

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud crunch as Ron stepped on what turned out to be a rat's skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Ginny might look like if they found her, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel.

"Harry - there's something up there -" said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Harry's shoulder.

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't moving.

"Maybe it's asleep," he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart's hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

* 302 *

Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

"Blimey," said Ron weakly.

There was a sudden movement behind them. Gilderoy Lockhart's knees had given way.

"Get up," said Ron sharply, pointing his wand at Lockhart.

Lockhart got to his feet - then he dived at Ron, knocking him to the ground.

Harry jumped forward, but too late - Lockhart was straightening up,

panting, Ron's wand in his hand and a gleaming smile back on his face.

"The adventure ends here, boys!" he said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body - say good-bye to your memories!"

He raised Ron's Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "Obliviate!"

The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock.

"Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!"

"I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rockfall. "I'm okay - this git's not, though - he got blasted by the wand ="

303

There was a dull thud and a loud "ow!" It sounded as though Ron had just kicked Lockhart in the shins.

"What now?" Ron's voice said, sounding desperate. "We can't get through - it'll take ages

Harry looked up at the tunnel ceiling. Huge cracks had appeared in it. He had never tried to break apart anything as large as these rocks by magic, and now didn't seem a good moment to try - what if the whole tunnel caved in?

There was another thud and another "ow!" from behind the rocks. They were wasting time. Ginny had already been in the Chamber of Secrets for hours Harry knew there was only one thing to do.

"Wait there," he called to Ron. "Wait with Lockhart. I'll go on.... If I'm not back in an hour. . .

There was a very pregnant pause,

"I'll try and shift some of this rock," said Ron, who seemed to be trying to keep his voice steady. "So you can - can get back through. And, Harry -"

"See you in a bit," said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice.

And he set off alone past the giant snake skin.

Soon the distant noise of Ron straining to shift the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

304

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive.

He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker.

"Open," said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill silence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Ginny?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the serpentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls.

He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall.

306

Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, facedown, lay a small, black-robed figure with flaming-red hair.

"tinny!" Harry muttered, sprinting to her and dropping to his knees. "tinny - don't be dead - please don't be dead -" He flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over. Her face was white as marble, and as cold, yet her eyes were closed, so she wasn't Petrified. But then she must be

"Ginny, please wake up," Harry muttered desperately, shaking her. Ginny's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window. But there was no mistaking him

"Tom - Tom Riddle?"

Riddle nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry's face.

"What d'you mean, she won't wake?" Harry said desperately. "She's

not - she's not -?"

"She's still alive," said Riddle. "But only just."

Harry stared at him. Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago, yet here he stood, a weird, misty light shining about him, not a day older than sixteen.

"Are you a ghost?" Harry said uncertainly.

* 30 7*

"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years.

He pointed toward the floor near the statue's giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. For a second, Harry wondered how it had got there - but there were more pressing matters to deal with.

"You've got to help me, Tom," Harry said, raising Ginny's head again. "We've got to get her out of here. There's a basilisk ... I don't know where it is, but it could be along any moment Please, help me -1)

Riddle didn't move. Harry, sweating, managed to hoist Ginny half off the floor, and bent to pick up his wand again.

But his wand had gone.

"Did you see -?"

He looked up. Riddle was still watching him - twirling Harry's wand between his long fingers.

"Thanks," said Harry, stretching out his hand for it.

A smile curled the corners of Riddle's mouth. He continued to stare at Harry, twirling the wand idly.

"Listen," said Harry urgently, his knees sagging with Ginny's dead weight. "We've got to go! If the basilisk comes -"

"It won't come until it is called," said Riddle calmly.

Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor, unable to hold her up any longer.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "Look, give me my wand, I might need it -"

Riddle's smile broadened.

"You won't be needing it," he said.

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Harry stared at him.

"What d'you mean, I won't be -?"

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you."

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later -"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here
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"How did Ginny get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley's like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. "My diary. Little Ginny's been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes - how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with secondhand robes and books, how" -Riddle's eyes glinted "how she

didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her"

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Harry's face. There was an almost hungry look in them.

"It's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. No one's ever understood me like you, Tom I'm so glad I've got this diary to

309

confide in It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn't suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her. . ."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat.

"No," Harry whispered.

"Yes," said Riddle, calmly. "Of course, she didn't know what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries ... far more interesting, they became Dear Tom," he recited, watching Harry's horrified face, "I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how they got there. Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I'm pale and I'm not myself. I think he

suspects me... There was another attack today

*310

and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm going mad... I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom!"

Harry's fists were clenched, the nails digging deep into his Palms.

"it took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary," said Riddle. "But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. And that's where you came in, Harry. You found it, and I couldn't have been more delighted. Of all the people who could have picked it up, it was you, the very person I was most anxious to meet . . ."

"And why did you want to meet me?" said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

"Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry," said Riddle. "Your whole fascinating history. " His eyes roved over the lightning scar on Harry's forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. "I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. So I decided to show you my famous capture of that great oaf, Hagrid, to gain your trust -"

"Hagrid's my friend," said Harry, his voice now shaking. "And you framed him, didn't you? I thought you made a mistake, but -"

Riddle laughed his high laugh again.

"It was my word against Hagrid's, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so brave, school prefect, model student ... on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls ... but I

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admit, even I was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought someone must realize that Hagrid couldn't possibly be the Heir of

Slytherin. It had taken me five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret entrance ... as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

"Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dipper to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did

"I bet Dumbledore saw right through you," said Harry, his teeth gritted.

"Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled," said Riddle carelessly. "I knew it wouldn't be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn't going to waste those long years I'd spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work."

"Well, you haven't finished it," said Harry triumphantly. "No one's died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake Draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again -"

"Haven't I already told you," said Riddle quietly, "that killing Mudbloods doesn't matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been -you."

Harry stared at him.

"Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was

312

opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me, not you. She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. "What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who'd been strangling roosters? So the foolish little brat waited until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin's heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery --

particularly if one of your best friends was attacked. And Ginny had told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue

"So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became very boring. But there isn't much life left in her She put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you'd come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Harry spat, fists still clenched.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that you a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent - managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

"Why do you care how I escaped?" said Harry slowly. "Voldemort was after your time

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter"

He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You see?" he whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who

abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry - I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

Harry's brain seemed to have jammed. He stared numbly at Riddle, at the orphaned boy who had grown up to murder Harry's own parents, and so many others At last he forced himself to speak.

"You're not," he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

"Not what?" snapped Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Harry, breathing fast. "Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you're hiding these days -"

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

31-4

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!" he hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music

to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock's and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix" said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"Fawkes?" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently

"And that -" said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat -"

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice - in your past, in my future - we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which would be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right ... but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny ... and in the

meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My common Muggle-born mother," he added, shaking with suppressed rage. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul -"

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Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile. "So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful countercharm. I can see now ... there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself We even look something alike ... but after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Riddle's twisted smile was widening again.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him"

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Riddle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed - but Harry understood what he was saying

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four. "

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Horrorstruck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole.

And something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths. 3 1

Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes' wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, "Don't leave me!" but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder - he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:

"Kill him. "

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feeling his way - Voldemort was laughing

Harry tripped. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood the serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming

There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed into the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body he heard more mad hissing, something thrashing wildly off the pillars

He couldn't help it - he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an oak trunk, had raised itself high in the air and its great blunt head was weaving drunkenly between the pillars. As Harry trembled, ready to close his eyes if it turned, he saw what had distracted the snake.

Fawkes was soaring around its head, and the basilisk was snapping furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabers

Fawkes dived. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a

318

sudden shower of dark blood splattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Harry, and before Harry could shut his eyes, it turned - Harry looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

"NO!" Harry heard Riddle screaming. "LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM. KILL HIM!"

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

"Help me, help me," Harry muttered wildly, "someone - anyone

The snake's tail whipped across the floor again. Harry ducked. Something soft hit his face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance - he rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the basilisk's tail swung over him again.

Help me - help me - Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight under the hat. Please help me

There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

3 19

A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

"KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. SNIFF -- SMELL HIM."

Harry was on his feet, ready. The basilisk's head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face him. He could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow him whole, lined with fangs long as his sword, thin, glittering, venomous -

It lunged blindly -- Harry dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Harry's side. He raised the sword in both his hands -

The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true -- Harry threw his whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent's mouth -

But as warm blood drenched Harry's arms, he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking deeper and deeper into his arm and it splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Harry slid down the wall. He gripped the fang that was spreading poison through his body and wrenched it out of his arm. But he knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as he dropped the fang and watched his own blood soaking his robes, his vision went foggy. The Chamber was dissolving in a whirl of dull color.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Harry heard a soft clatter of claws beside him.

"Fawkes," said Harry thickly. "You were fantastic, Fawkes"

1,520

He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent's fang had pierced him.

He could hear echoing footsteps and then a dark shadow moved in front of him.

"You're dead, Harry Potter," said Riddle's voice above him. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing, Potter? He's crying."

Harry blinked. Fawke's head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Harry felt drowsy. Everything around him seemed to be spinning.

"So ends the famous Harry Potter," said Riddle's distant voice. "Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry... She bought you twelve years of borrowed time ... but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must"

If this is dying, thought Harry, it's not so bad.

Even the pain was leaving him

But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Harry gave his head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on Harry's arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound -- except that there was no wound

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him - I said, get away --"

Harry raised his head. Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at

Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

"Phoenix tears. - ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course ... healing powers ... I forgot. . ."

He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter ... you and me...."

He raised the wand

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap -- the diary.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it. Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then

He had gone. Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there was silence. Silence except for the steady drip drip of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just traveled miles by Floo powder. Slowly, he gathered together his wand and the Sorting Hat, and, with a huge tug, retrieved the glittering sword from the roof of the basilisk's mouth.

Then came a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused

1,522

eyes traveled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry -- oh, Harry -- I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I c-couldn't say it in front of Percy -- it was me, Harry -- but I -- I s-swear I d-didn't mean to -- R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over -- and - how did you kill that -- that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I r-remember is him coming out of the diary --"

"It's all right," said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, "Riddle's finished. Look! Him and the basilisk. C'mon, Ginny, let's get out of here --"

"I'm going to be expelled!" Ginny wept as Harry helped her awkwardly to her feet. "I've looked forward to coming to Hogwarts ever since B-Bill came and n-now I'll have to leave and -- w-what'll Mum and Dad say?"

Fawkes was waiting for them, hovering in the Chamber entrance. Harry urged Ginny forward; they stepped over the motionless coils of the dead basilisk, through the echoing gloom, and back into the tunnel. Harry heard the stone doors close behind them with a soft hiss.

After a few minutes' progress up the dark tunnel, a distant sound of slowly shifting rock reached Harry's ears.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, speeding up. "Ginny's okay! I've got her!"

He heard Ron give a strangled cheer, and they turned the next bend to see his eager face staring through the sizable gap he had managed to make in the rock fall.

"Ginny!" Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the rock to pull

321,3

her through first. "You're alive! I don't believe it! What happened?" How - what -- where did that bird come from?"

Fawkes had swooped through the gap after Ginny.

"He's Dumbledore's," said Harry, squeezing through himself

"How come you've got a sword?" said Ron, gaping at the glittering weapon in Harry's hand.

"I'll explain when we get out of here," said Harry with a sideways glance at Ginny, who was crying harder than ever.

"But --"

"Later," Harry said shortly. He didn't think it was a good idea to tell Ron yet who'd been opening the Chamber, not in front of Ginny, anyway. "Where's Lockhart?"

"Back there," said Ron, still looking puzzled but jerking his head up the tunnel toward the pipe. "He's in a bad way. Come and see."

Led by Fawkes, whose wide scarlet wings emitted a soft golden glow in the darkness, they walked all the way back to the mouth of the pipe. Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting there, humming placidly to himself.

"His memory's gone," said Ron. "The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. Hasn't got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are. I told him to come and wait here. He's a danger to himself"

Lockhart peered good-naturedly up at them all.

"Hello," he said. "Odd sort of place, this, isn't it? Do you live here?"

"No," said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry bent down and looked up the long, dark pipe.

"Have you thought how we're going to get back up this?" he said to Ron.

324

Ron shook his head, but Fawkes the phoenix had swooped past Harry and was now fluttering in front of him, his beady eyes bright in the dark. He was waving his long golden tail feathers. Harry looked uncertainly at him.

"He looks like he wants you to grab hold. . ." said Ron, looking perplexed. "But you're much too heavy for a bird to pull up there -"

"Fawkes," said Harry, "isn't an ordinary bird." He turned quickly to the others. "We've got to hold on to each other. Ginny, grab Ron's hand. Professor Lockhart --"

"He means you," said Ron sharply to Lockhart.

"You hold Ginny's other hand --"

Harry tucked the sword and the Sorting Hat into his belt, Ron took hold of the back of Harry's robes, and Harry reached out and took hold of Fawkes's strangely hot tail feathers.

An extraordinary lightness seemed to spread through his whole body and the next second, in a rush of wings, they were flying upward through the pipe. Harry could hear Lockhart dangling below him, saying, "Amazing! Amazing! This is just like magic!" The chill air was whipping through Harry's hair, and before he'd stopped enjoying the ride, it was over -- all four of them were hitting the wet floor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and as Lockhart straightened his hat, the sink that hid the pipe was sliding back into place.

Myrtle goggled at them.

"You're alive," she said blankly to Harry.

"There's no need to sound so disappointed," he said grimly, wiping flecks of blood and slime off his glasses.

* 325*

"Oh, well ... Id just been thinking ... if you had died, you'd have been welcome to share my toilet," said Myrtle, blushing silver.

"Urgh!" said Ron as they left the bathroom for the dark, deserted corridor outside. "Harry! I think Myrtle's grown fond of you! You've got competition, Ginny!"

But tears were still flooding silently down Ginny's face.

"Where now?" said Ron, with an anxious look at Ginny. Harry pointed.

Fawkes was leading the way, glowing gold along the corridor. They strode after him, and moments later, found themselves outside Professor McGonagall's office.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

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or a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"Ginny!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, beaming, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steadying gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself and Ron being swept into Mrs. Weasleys tight embrace.

"You saved her! You saved her! How did you do it?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said Professor McGonagall weakly.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry, who hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid upon it the Sorting Hat, the rubyencrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary.

Then he started telling them everything. For nearly a quarter of an hour he spoke into the rapt silence: He told them about hearing the disembodied voice, how Hermione had finally realized that he was hearing a basilisk in the pipes; how he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest, that Aragog had told them where the last victim of the basilisk had died; how he had guessed that Moaning

Myrtle had been the victim, and that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might be in her bathroom

"Very well," Professor McGonagall prompted him as he paused, "so you found out where the entrance was -- breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add - but how on earth did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

So Harry, his voice now growing hoarse from all this talking, told them about Fawkes's timely arrival and about the Sorting Hat giving him the sword. But then he faltered. He had so far avoided mentioning Riddle's diary -- or Ginny. She was standing with her head against Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, and tears were still coursing silently down her cheeks. What if they expelled her? Harry thought in panic. Riddle's diary didn't work anymore How could they prove it had been he who'd made her do it all?

Instinctively, Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled faintly, the firelight glancing off his half-moon spectacles.

"What interests me most," said Dumbledore gently, "is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

328

Relief -- warm, sweeping, glorious relief -- swept over Harry. "W-what's that?" said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice. "YouKnow-Who? En-enchant Ginny? But Ginny's not ... Ginny hasn't been ... has she?"

"It was this diary," said Harry quickly, picking it up and showing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote it when he was sixteen"

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt and soggy pages.

"Brilliant," he said softly. "Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen." He turned around to the Weasleys, who were looking utterly bewildered.

"Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He

disappeared after leaving the school ... traveled far and wide ... sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

"But, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley. "What's our Ginny got to do with - with -- him?"

"His d-diaryl!" Ginny sobbed. "I've b-been writing in it, and he's been w-writing back all year --"

"tinny!" said Mr. Weasley, flabbergasted. "Haven't I taught you anything. What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain? Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was clearly full of Dark Magic ="

329

"I d-didn't know," sobbed Ginny. "I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I th-thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it --"

"Miss Weasley should go up to the hospital wing right away," Dumbledore interrupted in a firm voice. "This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort." He strode over to the door and opened it. "Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up," he added, twinkling kindly down at her. "You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She's just giving out Mandrake juice -- I daresay the basilisk's victims will be waking up any moment."

"So Hermione's okay!" said Ron brightly.

"There has been no lasting harm done, Ginny," said Dumbledore.

Mrs. Weasley led Ginny out, and Mr. Weasley followed, still looking deeply shaken.

"You know, Minerva," Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, "I think all this merits a good feast. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?"

"Right," said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. "I'll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?"

"Certainly," said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, deal with them? Surely - surely - they weren't about to be punished?

"I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules, said Dumbledore.

%30

Ron opened his mouth in horror.

"Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words," Dumbledore went on, smiling. "You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and -- let me see - yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor."

Ron went as brightly pink as Lockhart's valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.

"But one of us seems to be keeping mightily quiet about his part in this dangerous adventure," Dumbledore added. "Why so modest, Gilderoy?"

Harry gave a start. He had completely forgotten about Lockhart. He turned and saw that Lockhart was standing in a corner of the room, still wearing his vague smile. When Dumbledore addressed him, Lockhart looked over his shoulder to see who he was talking to.

"Professor Dumbledore," Ron said quickly, "there was an accident down in the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Lockhart --"

"Am I a professor?" said Lockhart in mild surprise. "Goodness. I expect I was hopeless, was I?"

"He tried to do a Memory Charm and the wand backfired," Ron explained quietly to Dumbledore.

"Dear me," said Dumbledore, shaking his head, his long silver mustache quivering. "Impaled upon your own sword, Gilderoy!"

"Sword?" said Lockhart dimly. "Haven't got a sword. That boy has, though." He pointed at Harry. "He'll lend you one."

"Would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infirmary, too?" Dumbledore said to Ron. "Id like a few more words with Harry

Lockhart ambled out. Ron cast a curious look back at Dumbledore and Harry as he closed the door.

Dumbledore crossed to one of the chairs by the fire.

"Sit down, Harry," he said, and Harry sat, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"First of all, Harry, I want to thank you," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling again. "You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you."

He stroked the phoenix, which had fluttered down onto his knee. Harry grinned awkwardly as Dumbledore watched him.

"And so you met Tom Riddle," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "I imagine he was most interested in you"

Suddenly, something that was nagging at Harry came tumbling out of his mouth.

"Professor Dumbledore ... Riddle said I'm like him. Strange likenesses, he said

"Did he, now?" said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. "And what do you think, Harry?"

"I don't think I'm like him!" said Harry, more loudly than he'd intended. "I mean, I'm -- I'm in Gryffindor, I'm . . ."

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

"Professor," he started again after a moment. "The Sorting Hat told me I'd -- I'd have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought I was Slytherin's heir for a while ... because I can speak Parseltongue

"You can speak Parseltongue, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly, "because Lord Voldemort -- who is the last remaining ancestor

§32

of Salazar Slytherin -- can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I'm sure

"Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?" Harry said, thunderstruck.

"It certainly seems so."

"So I should be in Slytherin," Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it --"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue - resourcefulness - determination -- a certain disregard for rules," he added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Harry sat motionless in his chair, stunned. "If you want proof, Harry, that you belong in Gryffindor, I suggest you look more closely at this."

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall's desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry

turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt.

Godric Gryffindor

333

"Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat, Harry," said Dumbledore simply.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. Then Dumbledore pulled open one of the drawers in Professor McGonagall's desk and took out a quill and a bottle of ink.

What you need, Harry, is some food and sleep. I suggest you go down to the feast, while I write to Azkaban -- we need our gamekeeper back. And I must draft an advertisement for the Daily Prophet, too," he added thoughtfully. "We'll be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher... Dear me, we do seem to run through them, don't we?"

Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering behind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was Dobby.

"Good evening, Lucius," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face.

The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to finish cleaning Mr. Malfoys shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

"So!" he said "You've come back. The governors suspended you, but

you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts."

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"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They'd heard that Arthur Weasleys daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn't agree to suspend me in the first place."

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury.

"So -- have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"Well?" said Mr. Malfoy sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary."

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the center, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

"I see. . ." said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

"A clever plan," said Dumbledore in a level voice, still staring Mr. Malfoy straight in the eye. "Because if Harry here" --Mr. Malfoy shot Harry a swift, sharp look -- "and his friend Ron hadn't discovered this book, why -- Ginny Weasley might have taken all

335

the blame. No one would ever have been able to prove she hadn't acted of her own free will

Mr. Malfoy said nothing. His face was suddenly masklike.

"And imagine," Dumbledore went on, "what might have happened then The Weasleys are one of our most prominent pure-blood families. Imagine the effect on Arthur Weasley and his Muggle Protection Act, if his own daughter was discovered attacking and -killing Muggle-borns Very fortunate the diary was discovered, and Riddle's memories wiped from it. "Who knows what the consequences might have been otherwise"

Mr. Malfoy forced himself to speak.

"Very fortunate," he said stiffly.

And still, behind his back, Dobby was pointing, first to the diary, then to Lucius Malfoy, then punching himself in the head.

And Harry suddenly understood. He nodded at Dobby, and Dobby backed into a corner, now twisting his ears in punishment.

"Don't you want to know how Ginny got hold of that diary, Mr. Malfoy?" said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on him.

"How should I know how the stupid little girl got hold of it?" he said.

"Because you gave it to her," said Harry. "In Flourish and Blotts. You picked up her old Transfiguration book and slipped the diary inside it, didn't you?"

He saw Mr. Malfoy's white hands clench and unclench.

"Prove it," he hissed.

"Oh, no one will be able to do that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. "Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On

336

the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort's old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf

"We're going, Dobby!"

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him -

"Professor Dumbledore," he said hurriedly. "Can I give that diary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Certainly, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "But hurry. The feast, remember

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby's squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly, wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his slimy, filthy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Malfoy," he gasped, skidding to a halt, "I've got something for you --"

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy's hand.

")What the --?"

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry.

',531

You'll meet the same sticky end as your parents one of these days, Harry Potter," he said softly. "They were meddlesome fools, too.

He turned to go.

"Come, Dobby. I said, come."

But Dobby didn't move. He was holding up Harry's disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure.

"Master has given a sock," said the elf in wonderment. "Master gave it to Dobby."

"What's that?" spat Mr. Malfoy. "What did you say?"

"Got a sock," said Dobby in disbelief. "Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby -- Dobby is free. "

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy. "You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now."

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

"Harry Potter freed Dobby!" said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes. "Harry Potter set Dobby free!"

"Least I could do, Dobby," said Harry, grinning. "Just promise never to try and save my life again."

The elf's ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

"I've just got one question, Dobby," said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry's sock with shaking hands. "You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well --"

"It was a clue, sir," said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. "Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?"

"Right," said Harry weakly. "Well, Id better go. There's a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now

Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle and hugged him.

"Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!" he sobbed.
"Farewell, Harry Potter!"

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. Harry didn't know whether the best bit was Hermione running toward him, screaming "You solved it! You solved it!" or Justin hurrying over from the Hufflepuff table to wring his hand and apologize endlessly for suspecting him, or Hagrid turning up at half past three, cuffing Harry and Ron so hard on the shoulders that they were knocked into their plates of trifle, or his and Ron's four hundred points for Gryffindor securing the House Cup for the second year running, or Professor McGonagall standing up to

339

tell them all that the exams had been canceled as a school treat ("Oh, no!" said Hermione), or Dumbledore announcing that, unfortunately, Professor Lockhart would be unable to return next year, owing to the fact that he needed to go away and get his memory back. Quite a few of the teachers joined in the cheering that greeted this news.

"Shame," said Ron, helping himself to a jam doughnut. "He was starting to grow on me."

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences - Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled ("but we've had plenty of practice at that anyway," Ron told a disgruntled Hermione) and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again.

Too soon, it was time for the journey home on the Hogwarts Express. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny got a compartment to themselves. They made the most of the last few hours in which they were allowed to do magic before the holidays. They played Exploding Snap, set off the very last of Fred and George's Filibuster fireworks, and practiced disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it.

They were almost at King's Cross when Harry remembered something.

"Ginny - what did you see Percy doing, that he didn't want you to tell anyone?"

340

"Oh, that," said Ginny, giggling. "Well - Percy's got a girlfriend." Fred dropped a stack of books on George's head.

"What?"

"It's that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them kissing in an empty classroom one day. He was so upset when she was -- you know - attacked. You won't tease him, will you?" she added anxiously.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Fred, who was looking like his birthday had come early.

"Definitely not," said George, sniggering.

The Hogwarts Express slowed and finally stopped.

Harry pulled out his quill and a bit of parchment and turned to Ron and Hermione.

"This is called a telephone number," he told Ron, scribbling it twice, tearing the parchment in two, and handing it to them. "I told your dad how to use a telephone last summer - he'll know. Call me at the Dursleys', okay? I can't stand another two months with only Dudley to talk to

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear what you did this year?"

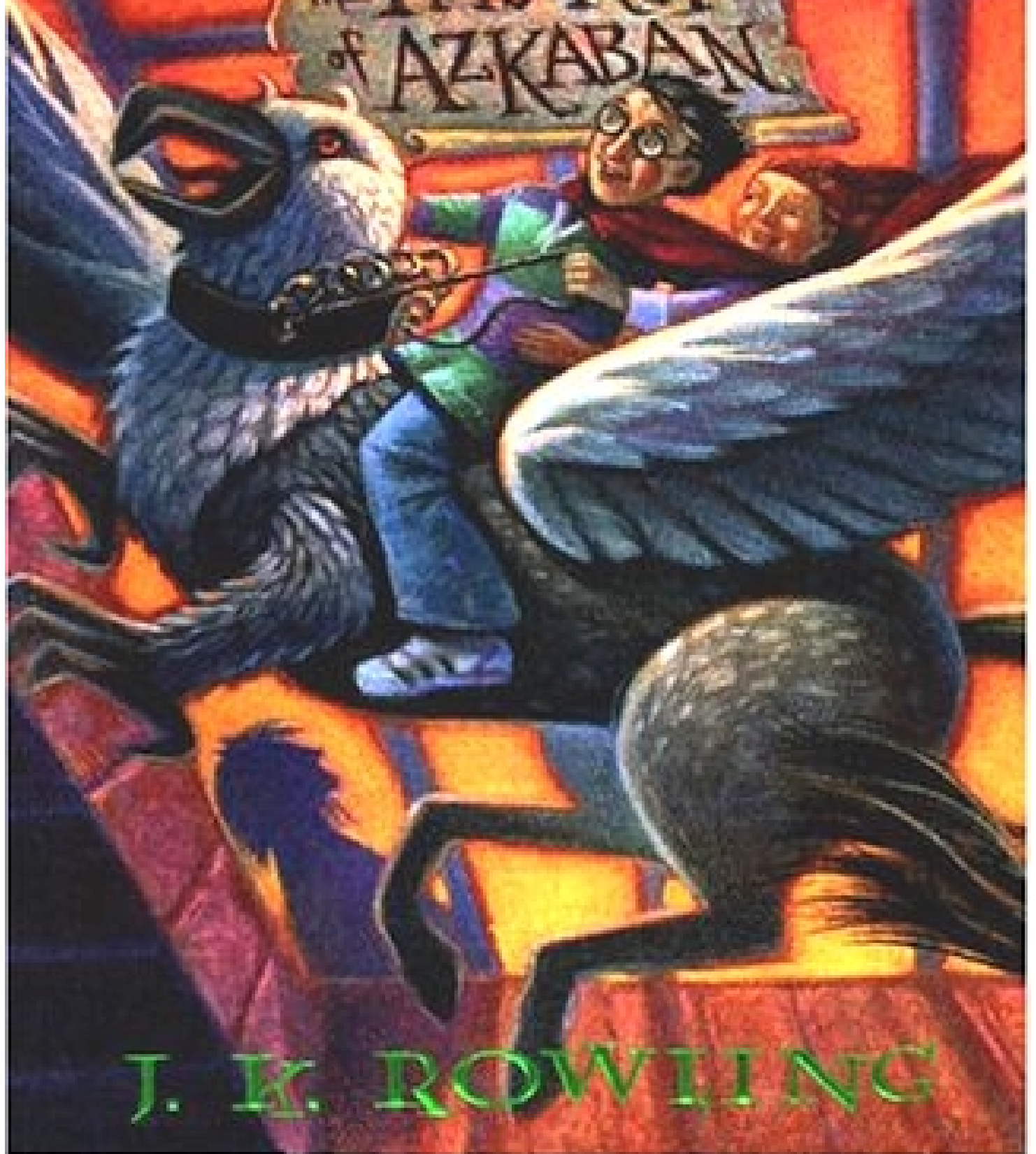
"Proud?" said Harry. "Are you crazy? All those times I could've died, and I didn't manage it? They'll be furious

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world. '

341

Harry Potter

AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN



J. K. ROWLING

CHAPTER ONE

OWL POST

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his homework but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his stomach in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a flashlight in one hand and a large leather-bound book (*A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot) propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down the page, frowning as he looked for something that would help him write his essay, "Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless discuss."

The quill paused at the top of a likely-looking paragraph. Harry Pushed his round glasses up the bridge of his nose, moved his flashlight closer to the book, and read:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than fortyseven times in various disguises.

Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he'd probably find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of number four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and

their son, Dudley, were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic. Harry's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never mentioned under the Dursleys' roof. For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, they would be able to squash the magic out of him. To their fury, they had been unsuccessful. These days they lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of the last two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The most they could do, however, was to lock away Harry's spellbooks, wand, cauldron, and broomstick at the start of the summer break, and forbid him to talk to the neighbors.

This separation from his spellbooks had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of holiday work. One of the essays, a particularly nasty one about shrinking potions, was for Harry's least favorite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be delighted to have an excuse to give Harry detention for a month. Harry had therefore seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley had gone out into the front garden to admire Uncle Vernon's new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, grabbed some of his books, and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he was studying magic by night.

Harry was particularly keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in an especially bad mood with him, all because he'd received a telephone call from a fellow wizard one week into the school vacation.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant that he knew a lot of things Harry didn't, but had never used a telephone before. Most unluckily, it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

"Vernon Dursley speaking."

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

"HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I -- WANT -- TO -- TALK -- TO -- HARRY
-- POTTER!"

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

"WHO IS THIS?" he roared in the direction of the mouthpiece. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"RON -- WEASLEY!" Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football field. "I'M -- A -- FRIEND -- OF -- HARRY'S -- FROM -- SCHOOL --"

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swiveled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

"THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHOOL YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!"

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if dropping a poisonous spider.

The fight that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

"HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE -- PEOPLE LIKE YOU!" Uncle Vernon had roared, spraying Harry with spit.

Ron obviously realized that he'd gotten Harry into trouble, because he hadn't called again. Harry's other best friend from Hogwarts, Hermione Granger, hadn't been in touch either. Harry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in Harry's year, had Muggle parents, knew perfectly well

how to use a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be almost as bad as the last one. There was just one very small improvement -- after swearing that he wouldn't use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to let his owl, Hedwig, out at night. Uncle Vernon had given in because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken only by the distant, grunting snores of his enormous cousin, Dudley. It must be very late, Harry thought. His eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps he'd finish this essay tomorrow night....

He replaced the top of the ink bottle; pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed; put the flashlight, *A History of Magic*, his essay, quill, and ink inside it; got out of bed; and hid the lot under a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous alarm clock on his bedside table.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Harry's stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card in his life. The Dursleys had completely ignored his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leaned on the sill, the cool night air pleasant on his face after a long time under the blankets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone this long before. But he hoped she'd be back soon -- she was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however, was just as it

always had been -- stubbornly untidy, whatever he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a thin scar, shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of the car crash that had killed Harry's parents, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by the most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years, Lord Voldemort. Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, where Voldemort's curse, instead of killing him, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Voldemort had fled....

But Harry had come face-to-face with him at Hogwarts. Remembering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window, Harry had to admit he was lucky even to have reached his thirteenth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring

back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak, expecting praise. Gazing absently over the rooftops, it was a few seconds before Harry realized what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flapping in Harry's direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window latch, wondering whether to slam it shut. But then the bizarre creature soared over one of the street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realizing what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed with a soft flump on Harry's bed, and the middle owl, which was large and gray, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large package tied to its legs.

Harry recognized the unconscious owl at once -- his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry dashed to the bed, untied the

cords around Errol's legs, took off the parcel, and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself. She gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognize the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its burden, it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings, and took off through the window into the night.

Harry sat down on his bed and grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold, and his first ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, he opened the envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out -- a letter and a newspaper clipping.

The clipping had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the Daily Prophet, because the people in the black-and-white picture were moving. Harry picked up the clipping, smoothed it out, and read:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank."

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.

Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face

as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving furiously at him, standing in front of a large pyramid. Plump little Mrs. Weasley; tall, balding Mr. Weasley; six sons; and one daughter, all (though the black-and-white picture didn't show it) with flaming-red hair. Right in the middle of the picture was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice and extremely poor. He picked up Ron's letter and unfolded it.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

It's amazing here in Egypt. Bill's taken us around all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptian wizards put on them. Mum wouldn't let Ginny come in the last one. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it's gone on this trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car the two of them had been flying to Hogwarts had crashed into a tree on the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. Any chance of meeting you there?

Don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

Ron

P.S. Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smug. He had pinned his Head Boy badge to the fez perched jauntily on top of his neat hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was another note from Ron beneath it.

Harry -- this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Bill says it's rubbish sold for wizard tourists and isn't reliable, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realize Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye --

Ron

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the luminous hands of his clock. He looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you -- what if they'd opened it at customs? -- but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got something for

your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world), Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads. I'm really jealous -- the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include some of the things I've found out, I hope it's not too long -- it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you come? I really hope you can. If not, I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express on September first!

Love from Hermione

P.S. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased Ron doesn't seem too happy about it

Harry laughed as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells -- but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case, with silver words stamped across it, reading Broomstick Servicing Kit.

"Wow, Hermione!" Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tall-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip on your broom for long journeys, and a Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the magical world -- highly dangerous, very exciting, and played on broomsticks. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the youngest person in a

century to be picked for one of the Hogwarts House teams. One of Harry's most prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognized the untidy scrawl on the brown paper at once: this was from Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He tore off the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but before he could unwrap it properly, the parcel gave a strange quiver, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly -- as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have a normal person's view of what was dangerous. Hagrid had been known to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs, and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his cabin.

Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, and raised it over his head, ready to strike. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell -- a book. Harry just had time to register its handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title *The Monster Book of Monsters*, before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it.

"Ouch!"

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, threw himself forward, and managed to flatten it. Uncle Vernon gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest of drawers, and pulled out a belt, which he buckled tightly around it. The Monster Book shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and reached for Hagrid's card.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year. Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you. Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

All the best,

Hagrid

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put Hagrid's card up next to Ron's and Hermione's, grinning more broadly than ever. Now there was only the letter from Hogwarts left.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment within, and read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade on certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed. Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade on weekends; he knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to persuade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign the form?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to cross off another day on the chart he'd made for himself, counting down the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down, eyes open, facing his three birthday cards.

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else -- glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.

CHAPTER TWO

AUNT MARGE'S BIG MISTAKE

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. They were watching a brand-new television, a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Far from wishing Harry a happy birthday, none of the Dursleys made any sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a piece of toast and then looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:

"... The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A

special hot line has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. Compared to the man on the television, however, whose gaunt face was surrounded by a matted, elbow-length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed.

The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce today --"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the reporter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from! \What use is that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry knew Aunt Petunia would simply love to be the one to call the hot line number. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbors.

"When will they learn," said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, "that hanging's the only way to deal with these people?"

"Very true," said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door's runner beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, "I'd better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge's train gets in at ten."

Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out. "Sh -- she's not coming here, is she?"

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon's sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry's (whose mother had been Aunt Petunia's sister), he had been forced to call her "Aunt" all his life. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn't often stay at Privet Drive, because she couldn't bear to leave her precious dogs, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry's mind.

At Dudley's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from beating Dudley at musical statues. A few years later, she had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, the year before Harry started at Hogwarts, Harry had accidentally trodden on the tail of her favorite dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had refused to call him off until past midnight. The memory of this incident still brought tears of laughter to Dudley's eyes.

"Marge'll be here for a week," Uncle Vernon snarled, "and while we're on the subject" -- he pointed a fat finger threateningly at Harry -- "we need to get a few things straight before I go and collect her."

Dudley smirked and withdrew his gaze from the television. Watching Harry being bullied by Uncle Vernon was Dudley's favorite form of entertainment.

"Firstly," growled Uncle Vernon, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge."

"All right," said Harry bitterly, "if she does when she's talking to me."

"Secondly," said Uncle Vernon, acting as though he had not heard Harry's reply, "as Marge doesn't know anything about your abnormality, I don't want any -- any funny stuff while she's here."

"You behave yourself, got me?"

"I will if she does," said Harry through gritted teeth.

"And thirdly," said Uncle Vernon, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face, "we've told Marge you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"What?" Harry yelled.

"And you'll be sticking to that story, boy, or there'll be trouble, spat Uncle Vernon.

Harry sat there, white-faced and furious, staring at Uncle Vernon, hardly able to believe it. Aunt Marge coming for a weeklong visit -- it was the worst birthday present the Dursleys had ever given him, including that pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks.

"Well, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon, getting heavily to his feet, "I'll be off to the station, then. Want to come along for the ride, Dudders?"

"No," said Dudley, whose attention had returned to the television now that Uncle Vernon had finished threatening Harry.

"Duddy's got to make himself smart for his auntie," said Aunt Petunia, smoothing Dudley's thick blond hair. "Mummy's bought him a lovely new bow tie."

Uncle Vernon clapped Dudley on his porky shoulder. "See you in a bit, then," he said, and he left the kitchen.

Harry, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea. Abandoning his toast, he got quickly to his feet and followed Uncle Vernon to the front door.

Uncle Vernon was pulling on his car coat.

"I'm not taking you," he snarled as he turned to see Harry watching him.

"Like I wanted to come," said Harry coldly. "I want to ask you something."

Uncle Vernon eyed him suspiciously.

"Third years at Hog -- at my school are allowed to visit the village sometimes," said Harry.

"So?" snapped Uncle Vernon, taking his car keys from a hook next to the door.

"I need you to sign the permission form," said Harry in a rush.

"And why should I do that?" sneered Uncle Vernon.

"Well," said Harry, choosing his words carefully, "it'll be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that St. Whatsits --"

"St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, and Harry was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Vernon's voice.

"Exactly," said Harry, looking calmly up into Uncle Vernon's large, purple face. "It's a lot to remember. I'll have to make it sound convincing, won't I? What if I accidentally let something slip?"

"You'll get the stuffing knocked out of you, won't you?" roared Uncle Vernon, advancing on Harry with his fist raised. But Harry stood his ground.

"Knocking the stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her," he said grimly.

Uncle Vernon stopped, his fist still raised, his face an ugly puce.

"But if you sign my permission form," Harry went on quickly, "I swear I'll remember where I'm supposed to go to school, and I'll act like a Mug -- like I'm normal and everything."

Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking it over, even if his teeth were bared and a vein was throbbing in his temple.

"Right," he snapped finally. "I shall monitor your behavior carefully during Marge's visit. If, at the end of it, you've toed the line and kept to the story, I'll sign your ruddy form."

He wheeled around, pulled open the front door, and slammed it so hard that one of the little panes of glass at the top fell out.

Harry didn't return to the kitchen. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. If he was going to act like a real Muggle, he'd better start now. Slowly and sadly he gathered up all his presents and his birthday cards and hid them under the loose floorboard with his homework. Then he went to Hedwig's cage. Errol seemed to have recovered; he and Hedwig were both asleep, heads under their wings. Harry sighed, then poked them both awake.

"Hedwig," he said gloomily, "you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errol. Ron'll look after you. I'll write him a note, explaining. And don't look at me like that" -- Hedwig's large amber eyes were reproachful -- "it's not my fault. It's the only way I'll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade with Ron and Hermione."

Ten minutes later, Errol and Hedwig (who had a note to Ron bound to her leg) soared out of the window and out of sight. Harry, now feeling thoroughly miserable, put the empty cage away inside the wardrobe.

But Harry didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Petunia was shrieking up the stairs for Harry to come down and get ready to welcome their guest.

"Do something about your hair!" Aunt Petunia snapped as he reached the hall.

Harry couldn't see the point of trying to make his hair lie flat. Aunt Marge loved criticizing him, so the untidier he looked, the happier she would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Vernon's car pulled back into the driveway, then the clunk of the car doors and footsteps on the garden path.

"Get the door!" Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

A feeling of great gloom in his stomach, Harry pulled the door open.

On the threshold stood Aunt Marge. She was very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a mustache, though not as bushy as his. In one hand she held an enormous suitcase, and tucked under the other was an old and evil-tempered bulldog.

"Where's my Dudders?" roared Aunt Marge. "Where's my neffy-poo?"

Dudley came waddling down the hall, his blond hair plastered flat to his fat head, a bow tie just visible under his many chins. Aunt Marge thrust the suitcase into Harry's stomach, knocking the wind out of him, seized Dudley in a tight one-armed hug, and planted a large kiss on his cheek.

Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley only put up with Aunt Marge's hugs because he was well paid for it, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dudley had a crisp twenty-pound note clutched in his fat fist.

"Petunia!" shouted Aunt Marge, striding past Harry as though he was a hat stand. Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia kissed, or rather, Aunt Marge bumped her large jaw against Aunt Petunia's bony cheekbone.

Uncle Vernon now came in, smiling jovially as he shut the door.

"Tea, Marge?" he said. "And what will Ripper take?"

"Ripper can have some tea out of my saucer," said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into the kitchen, leaving Harry alone in the hall with the suitcase. But Harry wasn't complaining; any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by him, so he began to heave the case upstairs into the spare bedroom, taking as long as he could.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, Aunt Marge had been supplied with tea and fruitcake, and Ripper was lapping noisily in the corner. Harry saw Aunt Petunia wince slightly as specks of tea and drool flecked her clean floor. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

"Who's looking after the other dogs, Marge?" Uncle Vernon asked.

"Oh, I've got Colonel Fubster managing them," boomed Aunt Marge. "He's retired now, good for him to have something to do. But I couldn't leave

poor old Ripper. He pines if he's away from me."

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down. This directed Aunt Marge's attention to Harry for the first time.

"So!" she barked. "Still here, are you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Don't you say yes' in that ungrateful tone," Aunt Marge growled. "It's damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you. Wouldn't have done it myself. You'd have gone straight to an orphanage if you'd been dumped on my doorstep."

Harry was bursting to say that he'd rather live in an orphanage than with the Dursleys, but the thought of the Hogsmeade form stopped him. He forced his face into a painful smile.

"Don't you smirk at me!" boomed Aunt Marge. "I can see you haven't improved since I last saw you. I hoped school would knock some manners into you." She took a large gulp of tea, wiped her mustache, and said, "Where is it that you send him, again, Vernon?"

"St. Brutus's," said Uncle Vernon promptly. "It's a first-rate institution for hopeless cases."

"I see," said Aunt Marge. "Do they use the cane at St. Brutus's, boy?" she barked across the table.

"Er --"

Uncle Vernon nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge's back.

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling he might as well do the thing properly, he added, "all the time."

"Excellent," said Aunt Marge. "I won't have this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it. A good thrashing is what's needed in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. Have you been beaten often?"

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, "loads of times."

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes.

"I still don't like your tone, boy," she said. "If you can speak of your beatings in that casual way, they clearly aren't hitting you hard enough. Petunia, I'd write if I were you. Make it clear that you approve the use of extreme force in this boy's case."

Perhaps Uncle Vernon was worried that Harry might forget their bargain; in any case, he changed the subject abruptly.

"Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?"

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, Harry caught himself thinking almost longingly of life at number four without her. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia usually encouraged Harry to stay out of their way, which Harry was only too happy to do. Aunt Marge, on the other hand, wanted Harry under her eye at all times, so that she could boom out suggestions for his improvement. She delighted in comparing Harry with Dudley, and took huge pleasure in buying Dudley expensive presents while glaring at Harry, as though daring him to ask why he hadn't got a present too. She also kept throwing out dark hints about what made Harry such an unsatisfactory person.

"You mustn't blame yourself for the way the boy's turned out, Vernon," she said over lunch on the third day. "If there's something rotten on the inside, there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Harry tried to concentrate on his food, but his hands shook and his face was starting to burn with anger. Remember the form, he told himself. Think about Hogsmeade. Don't say anything. Don't rise

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she said. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup --"

At that moment, the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding exploded in her hand. Shards of glass flew in every direction and Aunt Marge sputtered and blinked, her great ruddy face dripping.

"Marge!" squealed Aunt Petunia. "Marge, are you all right?"

"Not to worry," grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her napkin. "Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same thing at Colonel Fubster's the other day. No need to fuss, Petunia, I have a very firm grip..."

But Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were both looking at Harry suspiciously, so he decided he'd better skip dessert and escape from the table as soon as he could.

Outside in the hall, he leaned against the wall, breathing deeply. It had been a long time since he'd lost control and made something explode. He couldn't afford to let it happen again. The Hogsmeade form wasn't the only thing at stake -- if he carried on like that, he'd be in trouble with the Ministry of Magic.

Harry was still an underage wizard, and he was forbidden by wizard law to do magic outside school. His record wasn't exactly clean either. Only last summer he'd gotten an official warning that had stated quite clearly that if the Ministry got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Harry would face expulsion from Hogwarts.

He heard the Dursleys leaving the table and hurried upstairs out of the way.

Harry got through the next three days by forcing himself to think about his Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare whenever Aunt Marge started on him. This worked quite well, though it seemed to give him a glazed look, because Aunt Marge started voicing the opinion that he was mentally subnormal.

At last, at long last, the final evening of Marge's stay arrived. Aunt Petunia cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Vernon uncorked several bottles of wine. They got all the way through the soup and the salmon without a single mention of Harry's faults; during the lemon meringue pie, Uncle

Vernon bored them A with a long talk about Grunnings, his drill-making company; then Aunt Petunia made coffee and Uncle Vernon brought out a bottle of brandy.

"Can I tempt you, Marge?"

Aunt Marge had already had quite a lot of wine. Her huge face was very red.

"Just a small one, then," she chuckled. "A bit more than that... and a bit more... that's the ticket."

Dudley was eating his fourth slice of pie. Aunt Petunia was sipping coffee with her little finger sticking out. Harry really wanted to disappear into his bedroom, but he met Uncle Vernon's angry little eyes and knew he would have to sit it out.

"Aah," said Aunt Marge, smacking her lips and putting the empty brandy glass back down. "Excellent nosh, Petunia. It's normally just a fry-up for me of an evening, with twelve dogs to look after...." She burped richly and patted her great tweed stomach. "Pardon me. But I do like to see a healthy-sized boy," she went on, winking at Dudley. "You'll be a proper-sized man, Dudders, like your father. Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon...."

"Now, this one here --"

She jerked her head at Harry, who felt his stomach clench. The Handbook, he thought quickly.

"This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was- Weak. Underbred."

Harry was trying to remember page twelve of his book: A Charm to Cure Reluctant Reversers. "It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day.

Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia" she patted Aunt Petunia's bony hand with her shovellike one

"but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us."

Harry was staring at his plate, a funny ringing in his ears. Grasp your broom firmly by the tail, he thought. But he couldn't remember what came next. Aunt Marge's voice seemed to be boring into him like one of Uncle Vernon's drills.

"This Potter, 5) said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the brandy bottle and splashing more into her glass and over the tablecloth, "you never told me what he did?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were looking extremely tense. Dudley had even looked up from his pie to gape at his parents.

"He -- didn't work," said Uncle Vernon, with half a glance at Harry. "Unemployed."

"As I expected!" said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger who --"

"He was not," said Harry suddenly. The table went very quiet. Harry was shaking all over. He had never felt so angry in his life.

"MORE BRANDY!" yelled Uncle Vernon, who had gone very white. He emptied the bottle into Aunt Marge's glass. "You, boy," he snarled at Harry. "Go to bed, go on --"

"No, Vernon," hiccuped Aunt Marge, holding up a hand, her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Harry's. "Go on, boy, go on. Proud of your parents, are you? They go and get themselves killed in a car crash (drunk, I expect) --"

"They didn't die in a car crash!" said Harry, who found himself on his feet.

"They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!" screamed Aunt Marge, swelling with fury. "You are an insolent, ungrateful little --"

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her. She seemed to be swelling with inexpressible anger -- but the swelling didn't stop. Her great red face started to expand, her tiny eyes bulged, and her mouth stretched too tightly for speech -- next second, several buttons had just burst from her tweed jacket and pinged off the walls -- she was inflating like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, each of her fingers blowing up like a salami --

"MARGE!" yelled Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia together as Aunt Marge's whole body began to rise off her chair toward the ceiling. She was entirely round, now, like a vast life buoy with piggy eyes, and her hands and feet stuck out weirdly as she drifted up into the air, making apoplectic popping noises. Ripper came skidding into the room, barking madly.

"NOOOOOOOO!"

Uncle Vernon seized one of Marge's feet and tried to pull her down again, but was almost lifted from the floor himself. A second later, Ripper leapt forward and sank his teeth into Uncle Vernon's leg.

Harry tore from the dining room before anyone could stop him, heading for the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard door burst magically open as he reached it. In seconds, he had heaved his trunk to the front door. He sprinted upstairs and threw himself under the bed, wrenching up the loose floorboard, and grabbed the pillowcase full of his books and birthday presents. He wriggled out, seized Hedwig's empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to his trunk, just as Uncle Vernon burst out of the dining room, his trouser leg in bloody tatters.

"COME BACK IN HERE!" he bellowed. "COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT!"

But a reckless rage had come over Harry. He kicked his trunk open, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at Uncle Vernon.

"She deserved it," Harry said, breathing very fast. "She deserved what she got. You keep away from me."

He fumbled behind him for the latch on the door.

"I'm going," Harry said. "I've had enough."

And in the next moment, he was out in the dark, quiet street, heaving his heavy trunk behind him, Hedwig's cage under his arm.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KNIGHT BUS

Harry was several streets away before he collapsed onto a low wall in Magnolia Crescent, panting from the effort of dragging his trunk. He sat quite still, anger still surging through him, listening to the frantic thumping of his heart.

But after ten minutes alone in the dark street, a new emotion overtook him: panic. Whichever way he looked at it, he had never been in a worse fix. He was stranded, quite alone, in the dark Muggle world, with absolutely nowhere to go. And the worst of it was, he had just done serious magic, which meant that he was almost certainly expelled from Hogwarts. He had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry so badly, he was surprised Ministry of Magic representatives weren't swooping down on him where he sat.

Harry shivered and looked up and down Magnolia Crescent.

What, was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested, or would he simply be outlawed from the wizarding world? He thought of Ron and Hermione, and his heart sank even lower. Harry was sure that, criminal or not, Ron and Hermione would want to help him now, but they were both abroad, and with Hedwig gone, he had no means of contacting them.

He didn't have any Muggle money, either. There was a little wizard gold in the money bag at the bottom of his trunk, but the rest of the fortune his parents had left him was stored in a vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank in London. He'd never be able to drag his trunk all the way to London. Unless...

He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping painfully fast), a bit more magic couldn't hurt. He had the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father -- what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to his broomstick, covered himself in the cloak, and flew to London? Then he could get the rest of his money out of his vault and... begin his life as an outcast. It was a horrible prospect, but he couldn't sit on this wall forever, or he'd find himself trying to explain to Muggle police why he was out in the dead of night with a trunkful of spellbooks and a broomstick.

Harry opened his trunk again and pushed the contents aside, looking for the Invisibility Cloak - but before he had found it, he straightened up suddenly, looking around him once more.

A funny prickling on the back of his neck had made Harry feel he was being watched, but the street appeared to be deserted, and no lights shone from any of the large square houses.

He bent over his trunk again, but almost immediately stood up once more, his hand clenched on his wand. He had sensed rather than heard it: someone or something was standing in the narrow gap between the garage and the fence behind him. Harry squinted at the black alleyway. If only it would move, then he'd know whether it was just a stray cat or -- something else.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. He held it high over his head, and the pebble-dashed walls of number two suddenly sparkled; the garage door gleamed, and between them Harry saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, with wide, gleaming eyes.

Harry stepped backward. His legs hit his trunk and he tripped. His wand flew out of his hand as he flung out an arm to break his fall, and he landed, hard, in the gutter --

There was a deafening BANG, and Harry threw up his hands to shield his eyes against a sudden blinding light --

With a yell, he rolled back onto the pavement, just in time. A second

later, a gigantic pair of wheels and headlights screeched to a halt exactly where Harry had just been lying. They belonged, as Harry saw when he raised his head, to a triple-decker, violently purple bus, which had appeared out of thin air. Gold lettering over the windshield spelled The Knight Bus.

For a Split second, Harry wondered if he had been knocked silly by his fall. Then a conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began to speak loudly to the night.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. just stick out your wand hand, step on board) and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this eve --"

The conductor stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of "Harry, who was still sitting on the ground. Harry snatched up his wand again and scrambled to his feet. Close up, he saw that Stan Shunpike was only a few years older than he was, eighteen or nineteen at most, with large, protruding ears and quite a few pimples.

"What were you doin' down there?" said Stan, dropping his professional manner.

"Fell over," said Harry.

"Choo fall over for?" sniggered Stan.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Harry, annoyed. One of the knees in his jeans was torn, and the hand he had thrown out to break his fall was bleeding. He suddenly remembered why he had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the alleyway between the garage and fence. The Knight Bus's headlamps were flooding it with light, and it was empty.

"Choo lookin' at?" said Stan.

"There was a big black thing," said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. "Like a dog... but massive..."

He looked a-round at Stan, whose mouth was slightly open. With a feeling of unease, Harry saw Stan's eyes move to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Woss that on your 'ead?" said Stan abruptly.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly, flattening his hair over his scar. If the Ministry of Magic was looking for him, he didn't want to make it too easy for them.

"Woss your name?" Stan persisted.

"Neville Longbottom," said Harry, saying the first name that came into his head. "So -- so this bus," he went on quickly, hoping to distract Stan, "did you say it goes anywhere?"

"Yep," said Stan proudly, "anywhere you like, long's it's on land. Can't do nuffink underwater. 'Ere," he said, looking suspicious again, "You did flag us down, dincha? Stuck out your wand 'and, dincha?"

"Yes," said Harry quickly. "Listen, how much would it be to get to London?"

"Eleven Sickles," said Stan, "but for fifteen you get 'or chocolate, and for fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush in the color of your choice."

Harry rummaged once more in his trunk, extracted his money bag, and shoved some gold into Stan's hand. He and Stan then lifted his trunk, with Hedwig's cage balanced on top, up the steps of the bus.

There were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the curtained windows. Candles were burning in brackets beside each bed, illuminating the wood-paneled walls. A tiny wizard in a nightcap at the rear of the bus muttered, "Not now, thanks, I'm pickling some slugs" and rolled over in his sleep.

"You 'ave this one," Stan whispered, shoving Harry's trunk under the bed right behind the driver, who was sitting in an armchair in front of the steering wheel. "This is our driver, Ernie Prang. This ,is Neville Longbottom, Ern. "

Ernie Prang, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses, nodded to Harry, who nervously flattened his bangs again and sat down on his bed.

"Take 'er away, Ern," said Stan, sitting down in the armchair next to Ernie's.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the next moment Harry found himself flat on his bed, thrown backward by the speed of the Knight Bus. Pulling himself up, Harry stared out of the dark window and saw that they were now bowling along a completely different street. Stan was watching Harry's stunned face with great enjoyment.

"This is where we was before you flagged us down," he said. "Where are we, Ern? Somewhere in Wales?"

"Ar," said Ernie.

"How come the Muggles don't hear the bus?" said Harry.

"Them!" said Stan contemptuously. "Don' listen properly, do they? Don' look properly either. Never notice nuffink, they don'."

"Best go wake up Madam Marsh, Stan," said Ern. "We'll be in Abergavenny in a minute."

Stan passed Harry's bed and disappeared up a narrow wooden staircase. Harry was still looking out of the window, feeling increasingly nervous. Ernie didn't seem to have mastered the use of a steering wheel. The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn't hit anything; lines of lampposts, mailboxes, and trash cans jumped out of its way as it approached and back into position once it had passed.

Stan came back downstairs, followed by a faintly green witch wrapped in a traveling cloak.

"'Ere you go, Madam Marsh," said Stan happily as Ern stamped on the brake and the beds slid a foot or so toward the front of the bus. Madam Marsh clamped a handkerchief to her mouth and tottered down the steps. Stan threw her bag out after her and rammed the doors shut; there was

another loud BANG, and they were thundering down a narrow country lane, trees leaping out of the way.

Harry wouldn't have been able to sleep even if he had been traveling on a bus that didn't keep banging loudly and jumping a hundred miles at a time. His stomach churned as he fell back to wondering what was going to happen to him, and whether the Dursleys had managed to get Aunt Marge off the ceiling yet.

Stan had unfurled a copy of the Daily Prophet and was now reading with his tongue between his teeth. A large photograph of a sunken-faced man with long, matted hair blinked slowly at Harry from the front page. He looked strangely familiar.

"That man!" Harry said, forgetting his troubles for a moment. "He was on the Muggle news!"

Stanley turned to the front page and chuckled.

"Sirius Black," he said, nodding. "'Course 'e was on the Muggle news, Neville, where you been?"

He gave a superior sort of chuckle at the blank look on Harry's face, removed the front page, and handed it to Harry.

"You oughta read the papers more, Neville."

Harry held the paper up to the candlelight and read:

BLACK STILL AT LARGE

Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.

"We are doing all we can to recapture Black," said the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, "and we beg the magical community to remain calm."

Fudge has been criticized by some members of the International

Federation of Warlocks for informing the Muggle Prime Minister of the crisis.

"Well, really, I had to, don't you know," said an irritable Fudge.
"Black is mad. He's a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister's assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black's true identity to anyone. And let's face it-who'd believe him if he did?"

While Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun (a kind of metal wand that Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.

Harry looked into the shadowed eyes of Sirius Black, the only part of the sunken face that seemed alive. Harry had never met a vampire, but he had seen pictures of them in his Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, and Black, with his waxy white skin, looked just like one.

"Scary-lookin' fing, inee?" said Stan, who had been watching Harry read.

"He murdered thirteen people?" said Harry, handing the page back to Stan, "with one curse?"

"Yep," said Stan, "in front of witnesses an' all. Broad daylight. Big trouble it caused, dinnit, Ern?"

"Ar," said Ern darkly.

Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the back, the better to look at Harry.

"Black woz a big supporter of You-Know-'Oo," he said.

"What, Voldemort?" said Harry, without thinking.

Even Stan's pimples went white; Ern jerked the steering wheel so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside to avoid the bus.

"You outta your tree?" yelled Stan. "'Choo say 'is name for?"

"Sorry," said Harry hastily. "Sorry, I -- I forgot --"

"Forgot!" said Stan weakly. "Blimey, my 'eart's goin' that fast ..."

"So -- so Black was a supporter of You-Know-Who?" Harry prompted apologetically.

"Yeah," said Stan, still rubbing his chest. "Yeah, that's right. Very close to You-Know-'Oo, they say. Anyway, when little 'Arry Potter got the better of You-Know-'Oo --"

Harry nervously flattened his bangs down again.

"-- all You-Know-'Oo's supporters was tracked down, wasn't they, Ern? Most of 'em knew it was all over, wiv You-Know-'Oo gone, and they came quiet. But not Sirius Black. I 'eard he thought 'e'd be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo 'ad taken over.

"Anyway, they cornered Black in the middle of a street full of Muggles an' Black took out 'is wand and 'e blasted 'alf the street apart, an' a wizard got it, an' so did a dozen Muggles what got in the way. 'Orrible, eh? An' you know what Black did then?" Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

"What?" said Harry.

"Laughed," said Stan. "Jus' stood there an' laughed. An' when reinforcements from the Ministry of Magic got there, I 'e went wiv em quiet as anyfink, still laughing 'is 'ead off. 'Cos 'e's mad, inee, Ern? Inee mad?"

"If he weren't when he went to Azkaban, he will be now," said Ern in his slow voice. "I'd blow meself up before I set foot in that place. Serves him right, mind you ... after what he did...."

"They 'ad a job coverin' it up, din' they, Ern?" Stan said. "'Ole street blown up an' all them Muggles dead. What was it they said ad 'appened, Ern?"

"Gas explosion," grunted Ernie.

"An' now 'e's out," said Stan, examining the newspaper picture of Black's gaunt face again. "Never been a breakout from Azkaban before, 'as there, Ern? Beats me 'ow 'e did it. Frightenin', eh? Mind, I don't fancy 'is chances against them Azkaban guards, eh, Ern?"

Ernie suddenly shivered.

"Talk about summat else, Stan, there's a good lad. Them Azkaban guards give me the collywobbles."

Stan put the paper away reluctantly, and Harry leaned against the window of the Knight Bus, feeling worse than ever. He couldn't help imagining what Stan might be telling his passengers in a few nights' time.

"'Ear about that 'Arry Potter? Blew up 'is aunt! We 'ad 'im 'ere on the Knight Bus, di'n't we, Ern? 'E was tryin' I to run for it...."

He, Harry, had broken wizard law just like Sirius Black. Was inflating Aunt Marge bad enough to land him in Azkaban? Harry didn't know anything about the wizard prison, though everyone he'd ever heard speak of it did so in the same fearful tone. Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had spent two months there only last year. Harry wouldn't soon forget the look of terror on Hagrid's face when he had been told where he was going, and Hagrid was one of the bravest people Harry knew.

The Knight Bus rolled through the darkness, scattering bushes and wastebaskets, telephone booths and trees, and Harry lay, restless and miserable, on his feather bed. After a while, Stan remembered that Harry had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Harry's pillow when the bus moved abruptly from Anglesea to Aberdeen. One by one, wizards and witches in dressing gowns and slippers descended from the upper floors to leave the bus. They all looked very pleased to go.

Finally, Harry was the only passenger left.

"Right then, Neville," said Stan, clapping his hands, whereabouts in London?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry.

"Righto," said Stan. "'Old tight, then."

BANG.

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves out of the Knight Bus's way. The sky was getting a little lighter. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off -- where, he didn't know.

Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron, behind which lay the magical entrance to Diagon Alley.

"Thanks," Harry said to Ern.

He jumped down the steps and helped Stan lower his trunk and Hedwig's cage onto the pavement.

"Well," said Harry. "'Bye then!"

But Stan wasn't paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to the bus) he was goggling at the shadowy entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. "There you are, Harry," said a voice.

Before Harry could turn, he felt a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, "Blimey! Ern, come 'ere! Come 'ere I"

Harry looked up at the owner of the hand on his shoulder and felt a bucketful of ice cascade into his stomach -- he had walked right into Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself.

Stan leapt onto the pavement beside them.

"What didja call Neville, Minister?" he said excitedly.

Fudge, a portly little man in a long, pinstriped cloak, looked cold and exhausted.

"Neville?" he repeated, frowning. "This is Harry Potter."

"I knew it!" Stan shouted gleefully. "Ern! Ern! Guess 'oo Neville is, Ern! 'E's 'Arry Potter! I can see 'is scar!"

"Yes," said Fudge testily, "well, I'm very glad the Knight Bus picked Harry up, but he and I need to step inside the Leaky Cauldron now..."

Fudge increased the pressure on Harry's shoulder, and Harry found himself being steered inside the pub. A stooping figure bearing a lantern appeared through the door behind the bar. It was Tom, the wizened, toothless landlord.

"You've got him, Minister!" said Tom. "Will you be wanting anything? Beer? Brandy?"

"Perhaps a pot of tea," said Fudge, who still hadn't let go of Harry.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage and looking around excitedly.

"Ow come you di'n't tell us 'oo you are, eh, Neville?" said Stan, beaming at Harry, while Ernie's owlish face peered interestedly over Stan's shoulder.

"And a private parlor, please, Tom," said Fudge pointedly.

"Bye," Harry said miserably to Stan and Ern as Tom beckoned Fudge toward the passage that led from the bar.

"Bye, Neville!" called Stan.

Fudge marched Harry along the narrow passage after Tom's lantern, and then into a small parlor. Tom clicked his fingers, a fire burst into life in the grate, and he bowed himself out of the room.

"Sit down, Harry," said Fudge, indicating a chair by the fire.

Harry sat down, feeling goose bumps rising up his arms despite the glow of the fire. Fudge took off his pinstriped cloak and tossed it aside, then hitched up the trousers of his bottle-green suit and sat down opposite Harry.

"I am Cornelius Fudge, Harry. The Minister of Magic."

Harry already knew this, of course; he had seen Fudge once before, but as he had been wearing his father's Invisibility Cloak at the time, Fudge wasn't to know that.

Tom the innkeeper reappeared, wearing an apron over his nightshirt and bearing a tray of tea and crumpets. He placed the tray on a table between Fudge and Harry and left the parlor, closing the door behind him.

"Well, Harry," said Fudge, pouring out tea, "you've had us all in a right flap, I don't mind telling you. Running away from your aunt and uncle's house like that! I'd started to think... but you're safe, and that's what matters."

Fudge buttered himself a crumpet and pushed the plate toward Harry.

"Eat, Harry, you look dead on your feet. Now then... You will be pleased to hear that we have dealt with the unfortunate blowing-up of Miss Marjorie Dursley. Two members of the Accidental Magic Reversal Department were dispatched to Privet Drive a few hours ago. Miss Dursley has been punctured and her memory has been modified. She has no recollection of the incident at all. So that's that, and no harm done."

Fudge smiled at Harry over the rim of his teacup, rather like an uncle surveying a favorite nephew. Harry, who couldn't believe his ears, opened his mouth to speak, couldn't think of anything to say, and closed it again.

"Ah, you're worrying about the reaction of your aunt and uncle?" said Fudge. "Well, I won't deny that they are extremely angry, Harry, but they are prepared to take you back next summer as long as you stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays."

Harry unstuck his throat.

"I always stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays," he said, "and I don't ever want to go back to Privet Drive."

"Now, now, I'm sure you'll feel differently once you've calmed down," said Fudge in a worried tone. "They are your family, after all, and I'm sure you are fond of each other -- er -- very deep down."

It didn't occur to Harry to put Fudge right. He was still waiting to hear what was going to happen to him now.

"So all that remains," said Fudge, now buttering himself a second crumpet, "is to decide where you're going to spend the last two weeks of your vacation. I suggest you take a room here at the Leaky Cauldron and

"Hang on," blurted Harry. "What about my punishment?"

Fudge blinked. "Punishment?"

"I broke the law!" Harry said. "The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry!"

"Oh, my dear boy, we're not going to punish you for a little thing like that!" cried Fudge, waving his crumpet impatiently. "It was an accident! We don't send people to Azkaban just for blowing up their aunts!"

But this didn't tally at all with Harry's past dealings with the Ministry of Magic.

"Last year, I got an official warning just because a house-elf smashed a pudding in my uncle's house!" he told Fudge, frowning. "The Ministry of Magic said I'd be expelled from Hogwarts if there was any more magic there!"

Unless Harry's eyes were deceiving him, Fudge was suddenly looking awkward.

"Circumstances change, Harry... We have to take into account... in the present climate... Surely you don't want to be expelled?"

"Of course I don't," said Harry.

"Well then, what's A the fuss about?" laughed Fudge. "Now, have a crumpet, Harry, while I go and see if Tom's got a room for you."

Fudge strode out of the parlor and Harry stared after him. There was something extremely odd going on. Why had Fudge been waiting for him at the Leaky Cauldron, if not to punish him for what he'd done? And now Harry came to think of it, surely it wasn't usual for the Minister of Magic himself to get involved in matters of underage magic?

Fudge came back, accompanied by Tom the innkeeper.

"Room eleven's free, Harry," said Fudge. "I think you'll be very comfortable. just one thing, and I'm sure you'll understand... I don't want you wandering off into Muggle London, all right? Keep to Diagon Alley. And you're to be back here before dark each night. Sure you'll understand. Tom will be keeping an eye on you for me."

"Okay," said Harry slowly, "but why?"

"Don't want to lose you again, do we?" said Fudge with a hearty laugh. "No, no... best we know where you are.... I mean..."

Fudge cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pinstriped cloak.

"Well, I'll be off, plenty to do, you know..."

"Have you had any luck with Black yet?" Harry asked.

Fudge's finger slipped on the silver fastenings of his cloak.

"What's that? Oh, you've heard -- well, no, not yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Azkaban guards have never yet failed... and they are angrier than I've ever seen them."

Fudge shuddered slightly.

"So, I'll say good-bye."

He held out his hand and Harry, shaking it, had a sudden idea.

"Er -- Minister? Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," said Fudge with a smile.

"Well, third years at Hogwarts are allowed to visit Hogsmeade, but my aunt and uncle didn't sign the permission form. D'you think you could --?"

Fudge was looking uncomfortable.

"Ah," he said. "No, no, I'm very sorry, Harry, but as I'm not your parent or guardian --"

"But you I re the Minister of Magic," said Harry eagerly. "If you gave me permission

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, but rules are rules," said Fudge flatly.

'Perhaps You'll be able to visit Hogsmeade next year. In fact, I think it's best if you don't... yes... well, I'll be off Enjoy your stay, Harry."

And with a last smile and shake of Harry's hand, Fudge left the room. Tom now moved forward, beaming at Harry.

"If you'll follow me, Mr. Potter," he said, "I've already taken your things up..."

Harry followed Tom up a handsome wooden staircase to a door with a brass number eleven on it, which Tom unlocked and opened for him.

Inside was a very comfortable-looking bed, some highly polished oak furniture, a cheerfully crackling fire and, perched on top of the wardrobe -

"Hedwig!" Harry gasped.

The snowy owl clicked her beak and fluttered down onto Harry's arm.

"Very smart owl you've got there, chuckled Tom. "Arrived about five minutes after you did. If there's anything you need, Mr. Potter, don't hesitate to ask."

He gave another bow and left.

Harry sat on his bed for a long time, absentmindedly stroking Hedwig. The sky outside the window was changing rapidly from deep, velvety blue to cold, steely gray and then, slowly, to pink shot with gold. Harry could hardly believe that he'd left Privet Drive only a few hours ago, that he wasn't expelled, and that he was now facing two completely Dursley-free weeks.

"It's been a very weird night, Hedwig," he yawned.

And without even removing his glasses, he slumped back onto his pillows and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEAKY CAULDRON

It took Harry several days to get used to his strange new freedom. Never before had he been able to get up whenever he wanted or eat whatever he fancied. He could even go wherever he pleased, as long as it was in Diagon Alley, and as this long cobbled street was packed with the most fascinating wizarding shops in the world, Harry felt no desire to break his word to Fudge and stray back into the Muggle world.

Harry ate breakfast each morning in the Leaky Cauldron, where he liked watching the other guests: funny little witches from the country, up for a day's shopping; venerable-looking wizards arguing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and once, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woollen balaclava.

After breakfast Harry would go out into the backyard, take out his wand, tap the third brick from the left above the trash bin, and stand back

as the archway into Diagon Alley opened in the wall.

Harry spent the long sunny days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafes, where his fellow diners were showing one another their purchases ("it's a lunascope, old boy -- no more messing around with moon charts, see?") or else discussing the case of Sirius Black ("personalty, I won't let any of the children out alone until he's back in Azkaban"). Harry didn't have to do his homework under the blankets by flashlight anymore; now he could sit in the bright sunshine outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, finishing all his essays with occasional help from Florean Fortescue himself, who, apart from knowing a great deal about medieval witch burnings, gave Harry free sundaes every half an hour.

Once Harry had refilled his money bag with gold Galleons, silver Sickles, and bronze Knuts from his vault at Gringotts, he had to exercise a lot of self-control not to spend the whole lot at once. He had to keep reminding himself that he had five years to go at Hogwarts, and how it would feel to ask the Dursleys for money for spellbooks, to stop himself from buying a handsome set of solid gold Gobstones (a wizarding game rather like marbles, in which the stones squirt a nasty-smelling liquid into the other player's face when they lose a point). He was sorely tempted, too, by the perfect, moving model of the galaxy in a large glass ball, which would have meant he never had to take another Astronomy lesson. But the thing that tested Harry's resolution most appeared in his favorite shop, Quality Quidditch Supplies, a week after he'd arrived at the Leaky Cauldron.

Curious to know what the crowd in the shop was staring at, Harry edged his way inside and squeezed in among the excited witches and wizards until he glimpsed a newly erected podium, on which was mounted the most magnificent broom he had ever seen in his life.

"Just come out -- prototype --" a square-jawed wizard was telling his companion.

"It's the fastest broom in the world, isn't it, Dad?" squeaked a boy younger than Harry, who was swinging off his father's arm.

"Irish International Side's Just put in an order for seven of these

beauties!" the proprietor of the shop told the crowd. "And they're favorites for the World Cup!"

A large witch in front of Harry moved, and he was able to read the sign next to the broom:

**** THE FIREBOLT ****

THIS STATE-OF-THE-ART PACING BROOM SPORTS A STREAM-LINED, SUPERFINE HANDLE OF ASH, TREATED WITH A DIAMOND-HARD POLISH AND HAND- NUMBERED WITH ITS OWN REGISTRATION NUMBER. EACH INDIVIDUALLY SELECTED BIRCH TWIG IN THE BROOMTAIL HAS BEEN HONED TO AERODYNAMIC PERFECTION, GIVING THE FIREBOLT UNSURPASSABLE BALANCE AND PINPOINT PRECISION. THE FIREBOLT HAS AN ACCELERATION OF 150 MILES AN HOUR IN TEN SECONDS AND INCORPORATES AN UNBREAKABLE BRAKING CHARM. PRICE ON REQUEST.

Price on request... Harry didn't like to think how much gold the Firebolt would cost. He had never wanted anything as much in his whole life -- but he had never lost a Quidditch match on his Nimbus Two Thousand, and what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he had a very good broom already? Harry didn't ask for the price, but he returned, almost every day after that, just to look at the Firebolt.

There were, however, things that Harry needed to buy. He went to the Apothecary to replenish his store of potions ingredients, and as his school robes were now several inches too short in the arm and leg, he visited Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and bought new ones. Most important of all, he had to buy his new schoolbooks, which would include those for his two new subjects, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination.

Harry got a surprise as he looked in at the bookshop window. Instead of the usual display of gold- embossed spellbooks the size of paving slabs,

there was a large iron cage behind the glass that held about a hundred copies of The Monster Book of Monsters. Torn pages were flying everywhere as the books grappled with each other, locked together in furious wrestling matches and snapping aggressively.

Harry pulled his booklist out of his pocket and consulted it for the first time. The Monster Book of Monsters was listed as the required book for Care of Magical Creatures. Now Harry understood why Hagrid had said it would come in useful. He felt relieved; he had been wondering whether Hagrid wanted help with some terrifying new pet.

As Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, the manager came hurrying toward him.

"Hogwarts?" he said abruptly. "Come to get your new books?"

"Yes," said Harry, "I need --"

"Get out of the way," said the manager impatiently, brushing Harry aside. He drew on a pair of very thick gloves, picked up a large, knobbly walking stick, and proceeded toward the door of the Monster Books' cage.

"Hang on," said Harry quickly, "I've already got one of those."

"Have you?" A look of enormous relief spread over the manager's face. "Thank heavens for that. I've been bitten five times already this morning --"

A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the Monster Books had seized a third and were pulling it apart.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and knocking the books apart. "I'm never stocking them again, never! It's been bedlam! I thought we'd seen the worst when we bought two hundred copies of the Invisible Book of Invisibility -cost a fortune, and we never found them.... Well... is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down his booklist, "I need Unfogging the

Future by Cassandra Vablatsky."

"Ah, starting Divination, are you?" said the manager, stripping off his gloves and leading Harry into the back of the shop, where there was a corner devoted to fortune-telling. A small table was stacked with volumes such as Predicting the Unpredictable: Insulate Yourself Against Shocks and Broken Balls: When Fortunes Turn Foul.

"Here you are,'" said the manager, who had climbed a set of steps to take down a thick, black- bound book. "Unfogging the Future. Very good guide to all your basic fortune-telling methods - palmistry, crystal balls, bird entrails.

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had fallen on another book, which was among a display on a small table: Death Omens.- What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming.

"Oh, I wouldn't read that if I were you," said the manager lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. "You'll start seeing death omens everywhere. It's enough to frighten anyone to death. "

But Harry continued to stare at the front cover of the book; it showed a black dog large as a bear, with gleaming eyes. It looked oddly familiar...

The manager pressed Unfogging the Future into Harry's hands.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from the dog's and dazedly consulting his booklist. "Er -- I need Intermediate Transfiguration and The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three."

Harry emerged from Flourish and Blotts ten minutes later with his new books under his arms and made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron, hardly noticing where he was going and bumping into several people.

He tramped up the stairs to his room, went inside, and tipped his books onto his bed. Somebody had been in to tidy; the windows were open and sun was pouring inside. Harry could hear the buses rolling by in the

unseen Muggle street behind him and the sound of the invisible crowd below in Diagon Alley. He caught sight of himself in the mirror over the basin.

"It can't have been a death omen," he told his reflection defiantly. "I was panicking when I saw that thing in Magnolia Crescent.... It was probably just a stray dog...."

He raised his hand automatically and tried to make his hair lie flat

"You're fighting a losing battle there, dear," said his mirror in a wheezy voice.

As the days slipped by, Harry started looking wherever he went for a sign of Ron or Hermione. Plenty of Hogwarts students were arriving in Diagon Alley now, with the start of term so near. Harry met Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, his fellow Gryffindors, in Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they too were ogling the Firebolt; he also ran into the real Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, outside Flourish and Blotts. Harry didn't stop to chat; Neville appeared to have mislaid his booklist and was being told off by his very formidable-looking grandmother. Harry hoped she never found out that he'd pretended to be Neville while on the run from the Ministry of Magic.

Harry woke on the last day of the holidays, thinking that he would at least meet Ron and Hermione tomorrow, on the Hogwarts Express. He got up, dressed, went for a last look at the Firebolt, and was just wondering where he'd have lunch, when someone yelled his name and he turned.

"Harry! HARRY!"

They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor -- Ron looking incredibly freckly, Hermione, one very brown, both waving frantically at him.

"Finally!" said Ron, grinning at Harry as he sat down. "We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but they said you'd left, and we went to Flourish and Blotts, and Madam Malkin's, and --"

"I got all my school stuff last week," Harry explained. "And how come You knew I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron?" "Dad," said Ron simply.

Mr. Weasley, who worked at the Ministry of Magic, would of course have heard the whole story of what had happened to Aunt Marge.

"Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?" said Hermione in a very serious voice.

"I didn't mean to," said Harry, while Ron roared with laughter. "I just -- lost control."

"It's not funny, Ron," said Hermione sharply. "Honestly, I'm amazed Harry wasn't expelled."

"So am I," admitted Harry. "Forget expelled, I thought I was going to be arrested." He looked at Ron. "Your dad doesn't know why Fudge let me off, does he?"

"Probably 'cause it's you, isn't it?" shrugged Ron, still chuckling. "Famous Harry Potter and all that. I'd hate to see what the Ministry'd do to me if I blew up an aunt. Mind you, they'd have to dig me up first, because Mum would've killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself this evening. We're staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight too! So you can come to King's Cross with us tomorrow! Hermione's there as well!"

Hermione nodded, beaming. "Mum and Dad dropped me off this morning with all my Hogwarts things."

"Excellent!" said Harry happily. "So, have you got all your new books and stuff?"

"Look at this," said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. "Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn tail-hair. And we've got all our books --" He pointed at a large bag under his chair. "What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when we said we wanted two."

"What's all that, Hermione?" Harry asked, pointing at not one but three

bulging bags in the chair next to her.

„Well, I'm taking more new subjects than you, aren't I?" said Hermione. "Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, the Study of Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies --"

"What are you doing Muggle Studies for?" said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. "You're Muggle-born! Your mum and dad are Muggles! You already know all about Muggles!"

"But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

"I've still got ten Galleons," she said, checking her purse. "It's my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some money to get myself an early birthday present."

"How about a nice book?" said Ron innocently.

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione composedly. "I really want an owl. I mean, Harry's got Hedwig and you've got Errol --"

"I haven't," said Ron. "Errol's a family owl. All I've got is Scabbers." He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. "And I want to get him checked over," he added, placing Scabbers on the table in front of them. "I don't think Egypt agreed with him."

Scabbers was looking thinner than usual, and there was a definite droop to his whiskers.

"There's a magical creature shop just over there," said Harry, who knew Diagon Alley very well by now. "You could see if they've got anything for Scabbers, and Hermione can get her owl,"

So they paid for their ice cream and crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie.

There wasn't much room inside. Every inch of wall was hidden by cages. It was smelly and very noisy because the occupants Of these cages were all squeaking, squawking, jabbering, or hissing. The witch behind the counter was already advising a wizard on the care of double-ended newts, so Harry, Ron, and Hermione waited, examining the cages.

A pair of enormous purple toads sat gulping wetly and feasting on dead blowflies. A gigantic tortoise with a jewel-encrusted shell was glittering near the window. Poisonous orange snails were oozing slowly up the side of their glass tank, and a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again with a loud popping noise. Then there were cats of every color, a noisy cage of ravens, a basket of funny custard-colored furballs that were humming loudly, and on the counter, a vast cage of sleek black rats that were playing some sort of skipping game using their long, bald tails.

The double-ended newt wizard left, and Ron approached the counter.

"It's my rat," he told the witch. "He been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping tricks and scuffled to the wire for a better look.

Like nearly everything Ron owned, Scabbers the rat was secondhand (he had once belonged to Ron's brother Percy) and a bit battered. Next to the glossy rats in the cage, he looked especially woebegone.

"Hm," said the witch, picking up Scabbers. "How old is this rat?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Quite old. He used to belong to my brother."

"What powers does he have?" said the witch, examining Scabbers closely.

"Er --" The truth was that Scabbers had never shown the faintest trace of interesting powers. The witch's eyes moved from Scabbers's tattered

left ear to his front paw, which had a toe missing, and tutted loudly.

"He's been through the mill, this one," she said.

"He was like that when Percy gave him to me," said Ron defensively.

"An ordinary common or garden rat like this can't be expected to live longer than three years or so," said the witch. "Now, if you were looking for something a bit more hard-wearing, you might like one of these --"

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, "Show-offs."

"Well, if you Don't want a replacement, you can try this rat tonic," said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a small red bottle.

"Okay," said Ron. "How much -- OUCH!"

Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and then propelled itself, spitting madly, at Scabbers.

"NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!" cried the witch, but Scabbers, shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splay-legged on the floor, and then scampered for the door.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, racing out of the shop after him; Harry followed.

It took them nearly ten minutes to catch Scabbers, who had taken refuge under a wastepaper bin outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Ron stuffed the trembling rat back into his pocket and straightened up, massaging his head.

"What was that?"

"It was either a very big cat or quite a small tiger," said Harry.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Probably getting her owl

They made their way back up the crowded street to the Magical Menagerie. As they reached it, Hermione came out, but she wasn't carrying an owl. Her arms were clamped tightly around the enormous ginger cat.

"You bought that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat's ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a bit bowlegged and its face looked grumpy and oddly squashed, as though it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly in Hermione's arms.

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" said Ron.

"He didn't mean to, did you, Crookshanks?" said Hermione.

"And what about Scabbers?" said Ron, pointing at the lump in his chest pocket. "He needs rest and relaxation! How's he going to get it with that thing around?"

"That reminds me, you forgot your rat tonic," said Hermione, slapping the small red bottle into Ron's hand. "And stop worrying, Crookshanks will be sleeping in my dormitory and Scabbers in yours, what's the problem? Poor Crookshanks, that witch said he'd been in there for ages; no one wanted him."

"Wonder why," said Ron sarcastically as they set off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the Daily prophet.

"Harry!" he said, smiling as he looked up. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry as he, Ron, and Hermione joined Mr. Weasley

with A their shopping.

Mr. Weasley put down his paper, and Harry saw the now familiar picture of Sirius Black staring up at him.

"They still haven't caught him, then?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely grave. "They've pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far."

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" asked Ron. "It'd be good to get some more money --"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Mr. Weasley, who on closer inspection looked very strained. "Black's not going to be caught by a thirteen-year-old wizard. It's the Azkaban guards who'll get him back, You mark my words."

At that moment Mrs. Weasley entered the bar, laden with shopping bags and followed by the twins, Fred and George, who were about to start their fifth year at Hogwarts; the newly elected Head Boy, Percy; and the Weasleys' youngest child and only girl, Ginny.

Ginny, who had always been very taken with Harry, seemed even more heartily embarrassed than usual when she saw him, perhaps because he had saved her life during their previous year at Hogwarts. She went very red and muttered "hello" without looking at him. Percy, however, held out his hand solemnly as though he and Harry had never met and said, "Harry. How nice to see you.

"Hello, Percy," said Harry, trying not to laugh.

"I hope you're well?" said Percy pompously, shaking hands. It was rather like being introduced to the mayor.

"Very well, thanks --"

"Harry!" said Fred, elbowing Percy out of the way and bowing deeply. "Simply splendid to see you, old boy --"

"Marvelous," said George, pushing Fred aside and seizing Harry's hand in turn. "Absolutely spiffing."

Percy scowled.

"That's enough, now," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mum!" said Fred as though he'd only just spotted her and seizing her hand too. "How really corking to see you --"

"I said, that's enough," said Mrs. Weasley, depositing her shopping in an empty chair. "Hello, Harry, dear. I suppose you've heard our exciting news?" She pointed to the brand-new silver badge on Percy's chest. "Second Head Boy in the family!" she said, swelling with pride.

"And last," Fred muttered under his breath.

I don't doubt that," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning suddenly. "I notice they haven't made you two prefects."

"What do we want to be prefects for?" said George, looking revolted at the very idea. "It'd take all the fun out of life."

Ginny giggled.

"Yo u want to set a better example for your sister!" snapped Mrs. Weasley.

"Ginny's got other brothers to set her an example, Mother," said Percy loftily. "I'm going up to change for dinner..."

He disappeared and George heaved a sigh.

"We tried to shut him in a pyramid," he told Harry. "But Mum spotted us."

Dinner that night was a very enjoyable affair. Tom the innkeeper put three tables together in the parlor, and the seven Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione ate their way through five delicious courses.

"How're we getting to King's Cross tomorrow, Dad?" asked Fred as they dug into a sumptuous chocolate pudding.

"The Ministry's providing a couple of cars," said Mr. Weasley.

Everyone looked up at him.

"Why?" said Percy curiously.

"It's because of you, Perce," said George seriously. "And there'll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them"

"-- for Humongous Bighead," said Fred.

Everyone except Percy and Mrs. Weasley snorted into their pudding.

"Why are the Ministry providing cars, Father?" Percy asked again, in a dignified voice.

"Well, as we haven't got one anymore," said Mr. Weasley,

"-- and as I work there, they're doing me a favor --"

His voice was casual, but Harry couldn't help noticing that Mr. Weasley's ears had gone red, just like Ron's did when he was under Pressure.

"Good thing, too," said Mrs. Weasley briskly. "Do you realize how much luggage you've all got between you? A nice sight you'd be on the Muggle Underground.... You are all packed, aren't you?"

"Ron hasn't put all his new things in his trunk yet," said Percy, in a long-suffering voice. "He's dumped them on my bed."

"You'd better go and pack properly, Ron, because we won't have much time in the morning," Mrs. Weasley called down the table. Ron scowled at Percy.

After dinner everyone felt very full and sleepy. One by one they made

their way upstairs to their rooms to check their things for the next day. Ron and Percy were next door to Harry. He had just closed and locked his own trunk when he heard angry voices through the wall, and went to see what was going on.

The door of number twelve was ajar and Percy was shouting.

"It was here, on the bedside table, I took it off for polishing

"I haven't touched it, all right?" Ron roared back.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"My Head Boy badge is gone," said Percy, rounding on Harry.

"So's Scabbers's rat tonic," said Ron, throwing things out of his trunk to look. "I think I might've left it in the bar --"

"You're not going anywhere till you've found my badge!" yelled Percy.

"I'll get Scabbers's stuff, I'm packed," Harry said to Ron, and he went downstairs.

Harry was halfway along the passage to the bar, which was now very dark, when he heard another pair of angry voices coming from the parlor. A second later, he recognized them as Mr. and Mrs.

Weasleys'. He hesitated, not wanting them to know he'd heard them arguing, when the sound of his own name made him stop, then move closer to the parlor door.

"--makes no sense not to tell him," Mr. Weasley was saying heatedly. "Harry's got a right to know. I've tried to tell Fudge, but he insists on treating Harry like a child. He's thirteen years old and --"

"Arthur, the truth would terrify him!" said Mrs. Weasley shrilly. "Do you really want to send Harry back to school with that hanging over him? For heaven's sake, he's happy not knowing!"

"I don't want to make him miserable, I want to put him on his guard!"

retorted Mr. Weasley. "You know what Harry and Ron are like, wandering off by themselves -- they've ended up in the Forbidden Forest twice! But Harry mustn't do that this year! When I think what could have happened to him that night he ran away from home! If the Knight Bus hadn't picked him up, I'm prepared to bet he would have been dead before the Ministry found him."

"But he's not dead, he's fine, so what's the point

"Molly, they say Sirius Black's mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape from Azkaban, and that's supposed to be impossible. It's been three weeks, and no one's seen hide nor hair of him, and I don't care what Fudge keeps telling the Daily Prophet, we're no nearer catching Black than inventing self-spelling wands. The only thing we know for sure is what Black's after

"But Harry will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

"We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe. If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts."

"But no one's really sure that Black's after Harry

There was a thud on wood, and Harry was sure Mr. Weasley had banged his fist on the table.

"Molly, how many times do I have to tell you? They didn't report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but Fudge went out to Azkaban the night Black escaped. The guards told Fudge that Blacks been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: 'He's at Hogwarts... he's at Hogwarts.' Black is deranged, Molly, and he wants Harry dead. If you ask me, he thinks murdering Harry will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night Harry stopped You-Know-Who, and he's had twelve years alone in Azkaban to brood on that...."

There was a silence. Harry leaned still closer to the door, desperate to hear more.

"Well, Arthur, you must do what you think is right. But you're

forgetting Albus Dumbledore. I don't think anything could hurt Harry at Hogwarts while Dumbledore's headmaster. I suppose he knows about all this?"

"Of course he knows. We had to ask him if he minds the Azkaban guards stationing themselves around the entrances to the school grounds. He wasn't happy about it, but he agreed."

"Not happy? Why shouldn't he be happy, if they're there to catch Black?"

"Dumbledore isn't fond of the Azkaban guards," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Nor am I, if it comes to that... but when you're dealing with a wizard like Black, you sometimes have to join forces with those you'd rather avoid."

"If they save Harry then I will never say another word against them," said Mr. Weasley wearily. "It's late, Molly, we'd better go up...."

Harry heard chairs move. As quietly as he could, he hurried down the passage to the bar and out of sight. The parlor door opened, and a few seconds later footsteps told him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were climbing the stairs.

The bottle of rat tonic was lying under the table they had sat at earlier. Harry waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's bedroom door close, then headed back upstairs with the bottle.

Fred and George were crouching in the shadows on the landing, heaving with laughter as they listened to Percy dismantling his and Ron's room in search of his badge.

"We've got it," Fred whispered to Harry. "We've been improving it."

The badge now read Bighead Boy.

Harry forced a laugh, went to give Ron the rat tonic, then shut himself in his room and lay down on his bed.

So Sirius Black was after him. This explained everything. Fudge had been lenient with him because he was so relieved to find him alive. He'd made

Harry promise to stay in Diagon Alley where there were plenty of wizards to keep an eye on him. And he was sending two Ministry cars to take them all to the station tomorrow, so that the Weasleys could look after Harry until he was on the train.

Harry lay listening to the muffled shouting next door and wondered why he didn't feel more scared. Sirius Black had murdered thirteen people with one curse; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley obviously thought Harry would be panic-stricken if he knew the truth. But Harry happened to agree wholeheartedly with Mrs. Weasley that the safest place on earth was wherever Albus Dumbledore happened to be. Didn't people always say that Dumbledore was the only person Lord Voldemort had ever been afraid of? Surely Black, as Voldemort's right-hand man, would be just as frightened of him?

And then there were these Azkaban guards everyone kept talking about. They seemed to scare most people senseless, and if they were stationed all around the school, Black's chances of getting inside seemed very remote.

No, all in all, the thing that bothered Harry most was the fact that his chances of visiting Hogsmeade now looked like zero. Nobody would want Harry to leave the safety of the castle until Black was caught; in fact, Harry suspected his every move would be carefully watched until the danger had passed.

He scowled at the dark ceiling. Did they think he couldn't look after himself? He'd escaped Lord Voldemort three times; he wasn't completely useless....

Unbidden, the image of the beast in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent crossed his mind. What to do when you know the worst is coming...

"I'm not going to be murdered," Harry said out loud.

"That's the spirit, dear," said his mirror sleepily.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEMENTOR

Tom woke Harry the next morning with his usual toothless grin and a cup of tea. Harry got dressed and was just persuading a disgruntled Hedwig to get back into her cage when Ron banged his way into the room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head and looking irritable.

"The sooner we get on the train, the better," he said. "At least I can get away from Percy at Hogwarts. Now he's accusing me of dripping tea on his photo of Penelope Clearwater. You know," Ron grimaced, "his girlfriend. She's hidden her face under the frame because her nose has gone all blotchy..."

"I've got something to tell you," Harry began, but they were interrupted by Fred and George, who had looked in to congratulate Ron on infuriating Percy again.

They headed down to breakfast, where Mr. Weasley was reading the front page of the Daily Prophet with a furrowed brow and Mrs. Weasley was telling Hermione and Ginny about a love potion she'd made as a young girl. All three of them were rather giggly.

"What were you saying?" Ron asked Harry as they sat down.

"Later," Harry muttered as Percy stormed in.

Harry had no chance to speak to Ron or Hermione in the chaos of leaving; they were too busy heaving all their trunks down the Leaky Cauldron's narrow staircase and piling them up near the door, with Hedwig and Hermes, Percy's screech owl, perched on top in their cages. A small wickerwork basket stood beside the heap of trunks, spitting loudly.

"It's all right, Crookshanks," Hermione cooed through the wickerwork. "I'll let you out on the train."

"You won't," snapped Ron. "What about poor Scabbers, eh?"

He pointed at his chest, where a large lump indicated that Scabbers was curled up in his pocket.

Mr. Weasley, who had been outside waiting for the Ministry cars, stuck

his head inside.

"They're here, he said. "Harry, come on."

Mr. Weasley marched Harry across the short stretch of pavement toward the first of two old-fashioned dark green cars, each of which was driven by a furtive-looking wizard wearing a suit of emerald velvet.

"In you get, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, glancing up and down the crowded street.

Harry got into the back of the car and was shortly joined by Hermione, Ron, and, to Ron's disgust, Percy.

The journey to King's Cross was very uneventful compared with Harry's trip on the Knight Bus. The Ministry of Magic cars seemed almost ordinary, though Harry noticed that they could slide through gaps that Uncle Vernon's new company car certainly couldn't have managed. They reached King's Cross with twenty minutes to spare; the Ministry drivers found them trolleys, unloaded their trunks, touched their hats in salute to Mr. Weasley, and drove away, somehow managing to jump to the head of an unmoving line at the traffic lights.

Mr. Weasley kept close to Harry's elbow all the way into the station.

"Right then," he said, glancing around them. "Let's do this in pairs, as there are so many of us. I'll go through first with Harry."

Mr. Weasley strolled toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, pushing Harry's trolley and apparently very interested in the InterCity 125 that had just arrived at platform nine. With a meaningful look at Harry, he leaned casually against the barrier. Harry imitated him.

In a moment, they had fallen sideways through the solid metal onto platform nine and three-quarters and looked up to see the Hogwarts Express, a scarlet steam engine, puffing smoke over a platform packed with witches and wizards seeing their children onto the train.

Percy and Ginny suddenly appeared behind Harry. They were panting and had apparently taken the barrier at a run.

"Ah, there's Penelope!" said Percy, smoothing his hair and going Pink again. Ginny caught Harry's eye, and they both turned away to hide their laughter as Percy strode over to a girl with long, curly hair, walking with his chest thrown out so that she couldn't miss his shiny badge. stood back to let him on. They leaned out of the window and waved at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley until the train turned a corner and blocked them from view.

"I need to talk to you in private," Harry muttered to Ron and Hermione as the train picked up speed.

"Go away, Ginny," said Ron.

"Oh, that's nice," said Ginny huffily, and she stalked off.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment, but all were full except for the one at the very end of the train.

This had only one occupant, a man sitting fast asleep next to the window. Harry, Ron, and Hermione checked on the threshold. The Hogwarts Express was usually reserved for students and they had never seen an adult there before, except for the witch who pushed the food cart.

The stranger was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes that had been darned in several places. He looked ill and exhausted. Though quite young, his light brown hair was flecked with gray.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats farthest away from the window.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," whispered Hermione at once.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his case," she replied, pointing at the luggage rack over the man's head, where there was a small, battered case held together with a large quantity of neatly knotted string. The name Professor R. J. Lupin was stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

"Wonder what he teaches?" said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin's pallid profile.

"That's obvious," whispered Hermione. "There's only one vacancy, isn't there? Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already had two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, both of whom had lasted only one year. There were rumors that the job was jinxed.

"well, I hope he's up to it," said Ron doubtfully. "He looks like on, good hex would finish him off, doesn't he? Anyway..." He turned to Harry. "What were you going to tell us?"

Harry explained all about Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's argument and the warning Mr. Weasley had just given him. \When he'd finished, Ron looked thunderstruck, and Hermione had her hands over her mouth. She finally lowered them to say, "Sirius Black escaped to come after you? Oh, Harry... you'll have to be really, really careful. don't go looking for trouble, Harry --"

"I Don't go looking for trouble," said Harry, nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" said Ron shakily.

They were taking the news worse than Harry had expected. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be much more frightened of Black than he was.

"No one knows how he got out of Azkaban," said Ron uncomfortably. "No one's ever done it before. And he was a top-security prisoner too."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" said Hermione earnestly. "I Mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him too...." "What's that noise?" said Ron suddenly.

A faint, tinny sort of whistle was coming from somewhere. The, looked all around the compartment.

"It's coming from your trunk, Harry," said Ron, standing UP and reaching into the luggage rack. A moment later he had pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out from between Harry's robes. It was spinning very fast in the palm of Ron's hand and glowing brilliantly.

"Is that a Sneakoscope?" said Hermione interestedly, standing up for a better look.

"Yeah... mind you, it's a very cheap one," Ron said. "It went haywire just as I was tying it to Errol's leg to send it to Harry."

"Were you doing anything untrustworthy at the time?" said Hermione shrewdly.

"No! Well... I wasn't supposed to be using Errol. You know he's not really up to long journeys... but how else was I supposed to get Harry's present to him?"

"Stick it back in the trunk," Harry advised as the Sneakoscope whistled piercingly, "or it'll wake him up."

He nodded toward Professor Lupin. Ron stuffed the Sneakoscope into a particularly horrible pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks, which deadened the sound, then closed the lid of the trunk on it.

"We could get it checked in Hogsmeade," said Ron, sitting back down. "They sell that sort of thing in Dervish and Banges, magical instruments and stuff. Fred and George told me."

"Do you know much about Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione keenly. "I've read it's the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in Britain --"

"Yeah, I think it is," said Ron in an offhand sort of way.

"But that's not Why I want to go. I just want to get inside Honey Dukes."

"What's that?" said Hermione.

"It's this sweetshop," said Ron, a dreamy look coming over his face, "where they've got everything... Pepper Imps -- they make you smoke at the mouth -- and great fat Chocoballs full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck in class and just look like you're thinking what to write next --"

"But Hogsmeade's a very interesting place, isn't it?" Hermione pressed on eagerly. "In Sites of Historical Sorcery it says the inn was the headquarters for the 1612 goblin rebellion, and the Shrieking Shades supposed to be the most severely haunted building in Britain --"

"-- and massive sherbert balls that make you levitate a few inches off the ground while you're sucking them," said Ron, who was plainly not listening to a word Hermione was saying.

Hermione looked around at Harry.

"Won't it be nice to get out of school for a bit and explore Hogsmeade?"

"Spect it will," said Harry heavily. "You'll have to tell me when You've found out."

"What d'you mean?" said Ron.

"I can't go. The Dursleys didn't sign my permission form, and Fudge wouldn't either."

Ron looked horrified.

""You're not allowed to come? But -- no way -- McGonagall or someone will give you permission -- " musclely; Crabbe was taller, with a pudding-bowl haircut and a very thick neck; Goyle had short, bristly hair and long, gorilla-ish arms.

"Well, look who it is," said Malfoy in his usual lazy drawl, pulling open the compartment door. "Potty and the Weasel."

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled trollishly.

"I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this summer,

Weasley," said Malfoy. "Did your mother die of shock?"

Ron stood up so quickly he knocked Crookshanks's basket to the floor. Professor Lupin gave a snort.

"Who's that?" said Malfoy, taking an automatic step backward as he spotted Lupin.

"New teacher," said Harry, who got to his feet, too, in case he needed to hold Ron back. "What were you saying, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed; he wasn't fool enough to pick a fight right under a teacher's nose.

"C'mon," he muttered resentfully to Crabbe and Goyle, and they disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles.

"I'm not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year," he said angrily. "I mean it. If he makes one more crack about my family, I'm going to get hold of his head and --"

Ron made a violent gesture in midair.

"Ron," hissed Hermione, pointing at Professor Lupin, "be careful..."

But Professor Lupin was still fast asleep.

The rain thickened as the train sped yet farther north; the windows were now a solid, shimmering gray, which gradually darkened until lanterns flickered into life all along the corridors and over the luggage racks. The train rattled, the rain hammered, the wind roared, but still, Professor Lupin slept.

"We must be nearly there," said Ron, leaning forward to look past Professor Lupin at the now completely black window.

The words had hardly left him when the train started to slow down.

"Great," said Ron, getting up and walking carefully past Professor Lupin to try and see outside. "I'm starving. I want to get to the feast...."

"We can't be there yet," said Hermione, checking her watch.

"So why're we stopping?"

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pistons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever against the windows.

Harry, who was nearest the door, got up to look into the corridor. All along the carriage, heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. Then, without warning, all the lamps went out and they were plunged into total darkness.

"What's going on?" said Ron's voice from behind Harry.

"Ouch!" gasped Hermione. "Ron, that was my foot!"

Harry felt his way back to his seat.

"D'you think we've broken down?"

"Dunno..."

There was a squeaking sound, and Harry saw the dim black outline of Ron, wiping a patch clean on the window and peering out.

"There's something moving out there," Ron said. "I think people are coming aboard...."

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry's legs.

"Sorry -- d'you know what's going on? -- Ouch -- sorry"

"Hullo, Neville," said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak.

"Harry? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea -- sit down --"

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on Crookshanks.

"I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on," came Hermione's voice. Harry felt her pass him, heard the door slide open again, and then a thud and two loud squeals of pain.

"Who's that?"

"Who's that?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron --" "Come in and sit down --"

"Not here!" said Harry hurriedly. "I'm here!"

"Ouch!" said Neville.

"Quiet!" said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner.

None of them spoke.

There was a soft, crackling noise, and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a handful of flames. They illuminated his tired, gray face, but his eyes looked alert and

wary.

"Stay where you are," he said in the same hoarse voice, and he got slowly to his feet with his handful of fire held out in front of him.

But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water...

But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak.

And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart....

Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder. .

And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't... a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him -

"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W -- what?"

Harry opened his eyes; there were lanterns above him, and the floor was shaking -- the Hogwarts Express was moving again and the lights had come back on. He seemed to have slid out of his seat onto the floor. Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him, and above them he could see Neville and Professor Lupin watching. Harry felt very sick; when he put up his hand to push his glasses back on, he felt cold sweat on his face.

Ron and Hermione heaved him back onto his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking quickly toward the door. The hooded creature had vanished. "What happened? Where's that -- that thing? Who screamed?"

"No one screamed," said Ron, more nervously still.

Harry looked around the bright compartment. Ginny and Neville looked back at him, both very pale.

"But I heard screaming --"

A loud snap made them all jump. Professor Lupin was breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces.

"Here," he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. "Eat it. It'll help."

Harry took the chocolate but didn't eat it.

"What was that thing?" he asked Lupin.

"A dementor," said Lupin, who was now giving chocolate to everyone else. "One of the dementors of Azkaban."

Everyone stared at him. Professor Lupin crumpled up the empty chocolate wrapper and put it in his pocket.

"Eat," he repeated. "It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me..."

He strolled past Harry and disappeared into the corridor.

"Are you sure you're okay, Harry?" said Hermione, watching Harry anxiously.

"I Don't get it.... What happened?" said Harry, wiping more sweat off his face.

"Well -- that thing -- the dementor -- stood there and looked around (I mean, I think it did, I couldn't see its face) -- and you -- you

"I thought you were having a fit or something," said Ron, who still looked scared. "You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat and started twitching -- 11

"And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the dementor, and pulled out his wand," said Hermione, "and he said, 'None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go.' But the dementor didn't move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned around and sort of glided away.... "

"It was horrible," said Neville, in a higher voice than usual. "Did YOU feel how cold it got when it came in?"

I felt weird," said Ron, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably. "Like I'd never be cheerful again...."

Ginny, who was huddled in her corner looking nearly as bad as Harry felt, gave a small sob; Hermione went over and put a comforting arm around her.

"But didn't any of you -- fall off your seats?" said Harry awkwardly.

"No," said Ron, looking anxiously at Harry again. "Ginny was shaking like mad, though...."

Harry didn't understand. He felt weak and shivery, as though he were recovering from a bad bout of flu; he also felt the beginnings of shame. Why had he gone to pieces like that, when no one else had?

Professor Lupin had come back. He paused as he entered, looked around, and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know...."

Harry took a bite and to his great surprise felt warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," said Professor Lupin. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry didn't ask how Professor Lupin knew his name.

"Fine," he muttered, embarrassed.

They didn't talk much during the remainder of the journey. At long last, the train stopped at Hogsmeade station, and there was a great scramble to get outside; owls hooted, cats meowed, and Neville's pet toad croaked loudly from under his hat. It was freezing on the tiny platform; rain was driving down in icy sheets.

"Firs' years this way!" called a familiar voice. Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned and saw the gigantic outline of Hagrid at the other end of the platform, beckoning the terrified-looking new students forward for their traditional journey across the lake.

"All right, you three?" Hagrid yelled over the heads of the crowd. They waved at him, but had no chance to speak to him because the mass of people around them was shunting them away along the platform. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a rough mud track, where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled, Harry could only assume, by an invisible horse, because when they climbed inside and shut the door, the coach set off all by itself, bumping and swaying in procession.

The coach smelled faintly of mold and straw. Harry felt better since the chocolate, but still weak. Ron and Hermione kept looking at him sideways, as though frightened he might collapse again.

As the carriage trundled toward a pair of magnificent wrought iron

gates, flanked with stone columns topped with winged boars,

Harry saw two more towering, hooded dementors, standing guard on either side. A wave of cold sickness threatened to engulf him again; he leaned back into the lumpy seat and closed his eyes until they had passed the gates. The carriage picked up speed on the long, sloping drive up to the castle; Hermione was leaning out of the tiny window, watching the many turrets and towers draw nearer. At last, the carriage swayed to a halt, and Hermione and Ron got out.

As Harry stepped down, a drawling, delighted voice sounded in his ear.

"You fainted, Potter? Is Longbottom telling the truth? You actually fainted?"

Malfoy elbowed past Hermione to block Harry's way up the stone steps to the castle, his face gleeful and his pale eyes glinting maliciously.

"Shove off, Malfoy," said Ron, whose jaw was clenched.

"Did you faint as well, Weasley?" said Malfoy loudly. "Did the scary old dementor frighten you too, Weasley?"

"Is there a problem?" said a mild voice. Professor Lupin had just gotten out of the next carriage.

Malfoy gave Professor Lupin an insolent stare, which took in the patches on his robes and the delapidated suitcase. With a tiny hint of sarcasm in his voice, he said, "Oh, no -- er -- Professor," then he smirked at Crabbe and Goyle and led them up the steps into the castle.

Hermione prodded Ron in the back to make him hurry, and the three of them joined the crowd swarming up the steps, through the giant oak front doors, into the cavernous entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches, and housed a magnificent marble staircase that led to the upper floors.

The door into the Great Hall stood open at the right; Harry followed the crowd toward it, but had barely glimpsed the enchanted ceiling, which was black and cloudy tonight, when a voice called, "Potter! Granger! I want to see you both!"

Harry and Hermione turned around, surprised. Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher and head of Gryffindor House, was calling over the heads of the crowd. She was a stern-looking witch who wore her hair in a tight bun; her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles. Harry fought his way over to her with a feeling of foreboding: Professor McGonagall had a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

"There's no need to look so worried -- I just want a word in MY office," she told them. "Move along there, Weasley."

Ron stared as Professor McGonagall ushered Harry and Hermione away from the chattering crowd; they accompanied her across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase, and along a corridor.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, welcoming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned Harry and Hermione to sit down. She settled herself behind her desk and said abruptly, "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter."

Before Harry could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, came bustling in.

Harry felt himself going red in the face. It was bad enough that he'd passed out, or whatever he had done, without everyone making all this fuss.

"I'm fine," he said, "I don't need anything

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Madam Pomfrey, ignoring this and bending down to stare closely at him. "I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again?"

"It was a dementor, Poppy," said Professor McGonagall.

They exchanged a dark look, and Madam Pomfrey clucked disapprovingly.

"Setting dementors around a school, she muttered, pushing back Harry's hair and feeling his forehead. "He won't be the last one who collapses.

Yes, he's all clammy. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate

"I'm not delicate!" said Harry crossly.

"Of course you're not," said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking his pulse.

"What does he need?" said Professor McGonagall crisply. "Bed rest? Should he perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"I'm fine!" said Harry, jumping up. The thought of what Draco Malfoy would say if he had to go to the hospital wing was torture.

"Well, he should have some chocolate, at the very least," said Madam Pomfrey, who was now trying to peer into Harry's eyes.

"I've already had some," said Harry. "Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us."

"Did he, now?" said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?"

"Are you sure you feel all right, Potter?" Professor McGonagall said sharply.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Very well. Kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger about her course schedule, then we can go down to the feast together."

Harry went back into the corridor with Madam Pomfrey, who left for the hospital wing, muttering to herself He had to wait only a few minutes; then Hermione emerged looking very happy about something, followed by Professor McGonagall, and the three of them made their way back down the marble staircase to the Great Hall.

It was a sea of pointed black hats; each of the long House tables was lined with students, their faces glimmering by the light of thousands of

candles, which were floating over the tables in midair. Professor Flitwick, who was a tiny little wizard with a shock of white hair, was carrying an ancient hat and a three-legged stool out of the hall.

"Oh," said Hermione softly, "we've missed the Sorting!"

New students at Hogwarts were sorted into Houses by trying on the sorting Hat, which shouted out the House they were best suited to (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin). Professor McGonagall strode off toward her empty seat at the staff table, and Harry and Hermione set off in the other direction, as quietly as possible, toward the Gryffindor table. People looked around at them as they passed along the back of the hall, and a few of them pointed at Harry. Had the story of his collapsing in front of the dementor traveled that fast?

He and Hermione sat down on either side of Ron, who had saved them seats.

"What was all that about?" he muttered to Harry.

Harry started to explain in a whisper, but at that moment the headmaster stood up to speak, and he broke off.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impression of great energy. He had several feet of long silver hair and beard, half-moon spectacles, and an extremely crooked nose. He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn't why Harry respected him. You couldn't help trusting Albus Dumbledore, and as Harry watched him beaming around at the students, he felt really calm for the first time since the dementor had entered the train compartment.

"Welcome!" said Dumbledore, the candlelight shimmering on his beard. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast...."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, "As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

He paused, and Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had said about Dumbledore not being happy with the dementors guarding the school.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises -- or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly, and Harry and Ron glanced at each other. "It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the dementors," he said.

Percy, who was sitting a few seats down from Harry, puffed out his chest again and stared around impressively. Dumbledore paused again; he looked very seriously around the hall, and nobody moved or made a sound.

"On a happier note," he continued, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was some scattered, rather unenthusiastic applause. Only those who had been in the compartment on the train with Professor Lupin clapped hard, Harry among them. Professor Lupin looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

"Look at Snape!" Ron hissed in Harry's ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, but even Harry, who hated Snape, was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. It was beyond anger: it was loathing. Harry knew that expression only too well; it was the look Snape wore every time he set eyes on Harry.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued as the lukewarm applause for Professor Lupin died away. "Well, I am sorry to tell you

that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Then they joined in with the applause, which was tumultuous at the Gryffindor table in particular. Harry leaned forward to see Hagrid, who was ruby-red in the face and staring down at his enormous hands, his wide grin hidden in the tangle of his black beard.

"We should've known!" Ron roared, pounding the table. "Who else would have assigned us a biting book?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the last to stop clapping, and as Professor Dumbledore started speaking again, they saw that Hagrid was wiping his eyes on the tablecloth.

"Well, I think that's everything of importance," said Dumbledore. "Let the feast begin!"

The golden plates and goblets before them filled suddenly with food and drink. Harry, suddenly ravenous, helped himself to everything he could reach and began to eat.

It was a delicious feast; the hall echoed with talk, laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were eager for it to finish so that they could talk to Hagrid. They knew how much being made a teacher would mean to him. Hagrid wasn't a fully qualified wizard; he had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year for a crime he had not committed. It had been Harry, Ron, and Hermione who had cleared Hagrid's name last year.

At long last, when the last morsels of pumpkin tart had melted from the golden platters, Dumbledore gave the word that it was time for them all to go to bed, and they got their chance.

"Congratulations, Hagrid!" Hermione squealed as they reached the teachers' table.

"All down ter you three," said Hagrid, wiping his shining face on his napkin as he looked up at them., "Can' believe it... great man, Dumbledore... came straight down to me hut after Professor Kettleburn said he'd had enough.... It's what I always wanted. --"

Overcome with emotion, he buried his face in his napkin, and Professor McGonagall shooed them away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the Gryffindors streaming up the marble staircase and, very tired now, along more corridors, UP more and more stairs, to the hidden entrance to Gryffindor Tower's large portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress asked them, "Password?"

"Coming through, coming through!" Percy called from behind the crowd. "The new password's 'Fortuna Major'!"

"Oh no," said Neville Longbottom sadly. He always had trouble remembering the passwords.

Through the portrait hole and across the common room, the girls and boys divided toward their separate staircases. Harry climbed the spiral stair with no thought in his head except how glad he was to be back. They reached their familiar, circular dormitory with its five four-poster beds, and Harry, looking around, felt he was home at last.

CHAPTER SIX

TALONS AND TEA LEAVES

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy, who seemed to be entertaining a large group of Slytherins with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

"Ignore him," said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. "Just ignore him, it's not worth it...."

"Hey, Potter!" shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face

like a pug. "Potter! The dementors are coming, Potter! Woouooooooooo!"

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

"New third-year course schedules," said George, passing then, over. "What's up with you, Harry?"

"Malfoy," said Ron, sitting down on George's other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

"That little git," he said calmly. "He wasn't so cocky last night when the dementors were down at our end of the train. Came running into our compartment, didn't he, Fred?"

"Nearly wet himself," said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

"I wasn't too happy myself," said George. "They're horrible things, those dementors...."

"Sort of freeze your insides, don't they?" said Fred.

"You didn't pass out, though, did you?" said Harry in a low voice.

"Forget it, Harry," said George bracingly. "Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he'd ever been, he came back all weak and shaking.... They suck the happiness out of a place, dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there."

"Anyway, we'll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quidditch match," said Fred. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season, remember?"

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Feeling slightly more cheerful, Harry helped himself to sausages and fried tomatoes.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

"Ooh, good, we're starting some new subjects today," she said happily. Villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come I scorn at my fall, perchance? Draw, you knaves, you dogs!"

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently, hopping up and down in rage. But the sword was too long for him; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed facedown in the grass.

"Are you all right?" said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

"Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!"

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and, though he pulled with all his might, he couldn't get it out again. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

"Listen," said Harry, taking advantage of the knight's exhaustion, "we're looking for the North Tower. You don't know the way, do you?"

"A quest!" The knight's rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, "Come follow me, dear friends, and we shall find our goal, or else shall perish bravely in the charge!"

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, good sirs and gentle lady! On! On!"

And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through a picture ahead.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of women in

crinolines, whose picture hung on the wall of a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzier and dizzier, until at last they heard the murmur of voices above them and knew they had reached the classroom.

"Farewell!" cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. "Farewell, my comrades-in-arms! If ever you have need of noble heart and steely sinew, call upon Sir Cadogan!"

"Yeah, we'll call you," muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, "if we ever need someone mental."

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing, where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing, but Ron nudged Harry and pointed at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

"Sibyll Trelawney, Divination teacher," Harry read. "How're we supposed to get up there?"

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry's feet. Everyone got quiet.

"After you," said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn't look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone's attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry's shoulder as the class assembled around them, all

talking in whispers.

"Where is she?" Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

"Welcome," it said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

Harry's immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

"Sit, my children, sit," she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat themselves around the same round table.

"Welcome to Divination," said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. "My name is professor Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and continued, "So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you.. Books can take you only so far in this field...."

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books wouldn't be much help in this subject.

"Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future," Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. "It is a Gift

granted to few. You, boy," she said suddenly to Neville, who almost toppled off his pouf. "Is your grandmother well?"

"I think so," said Neville tremulously.

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, dear," said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earrings. Neville gulped. Professor Trelawney continued placidly. "We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear," she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, "beware a red-haired man."

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her and edged her chair away from him.

"In the second term," Professor Trelawney went on, "we shall progress to the crystal ball -- if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever."

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

"I wonder, dear," she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, "if you could pass me the largest silver teapot?"

Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

"Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading -- it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October."

Lavender trembled.

"Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the

last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging the Future. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear" -- she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up -- "after you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I'm rather attached to the pink."

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, "One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn't mind... thank you. ... "

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney had instructed, then drained the cups and swapped over.

"Right," said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. "What can you see in mine?"

"A load of soggy brown stuff," said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Professor Trelawney cried through the gloom.

Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Right, you've got a crooked sort of cross... " He consulted Unfogging the Future. "That means you're going to have 'trials and suffering' -- sorry about that -- but there's a thing that could be the sun... hang on... that means 'great happiness'... so you're going to suffer but be very happy...."

"You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me," said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney gazed in their direction.

"My turn..." Ron peered into Harry's teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. "There's a blob a bit like a bowler hat," he said. "Maybe you're

going to work for the Ministry of Magic...

He turned the teacup the other way up.

"But this way it looks more like an acorn.... What's that?" He scanned his copy of Unfogging the Future. "A windfall, unexpected gold.' Excellent, you can lend me some... and there's a thin, here," he turned the cup again, "that looks like an animal... yeah, if that was its head... it looks like a hippo... no, a sheep..."

Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

"Let me see that, my dear," she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry's cup from him. Everyone went quiet to watch.

Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

"The falcon... my dear, you have a deadly enemy."

"But everyone knows that, " said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

"Well, they do," said Hermione. "Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who."

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to a teacher like that before. Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it.

"The club... an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup....

I thought that was a bowler hat," said Ron sheepishly.

"The skull... danger in your path, my dear...."

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy... my poor, dear boy no it is kinder not to say... no... don't ask me...."

"What is it, Professor?" said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry and Ron's table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney's chair to get a

good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically,

"You have the Grim."

"The what?" said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn't the only one who didn't understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown looked puzzled, but nearly everybody else clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen -- the worst omen -- of death!"

Harry's stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of Death Omens in Flourish and Blotts -the dog in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent... Lavender Brown clapped her hands to her mouth too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney's chair.

"I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the

future." Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

"It looks like a Grim if you do this," he said, with his eyes almost shut, "but it looks more like a donkey from here," he said, leaning to the left.

"When you've all finished deciding whether I'm going to die Or not!" said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him.

"I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. "Yes... please pack away your things...."

Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed away their books, and closed their bags. Even Ron was avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear" -- she pointed at Neville -- "you'll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's ladder and the winding stair in silence, then set off for Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration lesson. It took them so long to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him, as though he were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals), and wasn't even watching when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle markings around her eyes.

"Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint pop, and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and --"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning.

"There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?"

Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues --"

Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, "Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney --"

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in."

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light and befuddling perfume of Professor Trelawney's classroom. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, "But what about Neville's cup?"

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd

thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"Ron, cheer up," said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn't start.

"Harry," he said, in a low, serious voice, "You haven't seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, I have," said Harry. "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'."

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

"Probably a stray," said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

"Hermione, if Harry's seen a Grim, that's -- that's bad," he said. "My -- my uncle Bilius saw one and -- and he died twenty-four hours later!"

"Coincidence," said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" said Ron, starting to get angry. "Grims scare the living daylights out of most wizards!"

"There you are, then," said Hermione in a superior tone. "They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim's not an omen, it's the cause of death! And Harry's still with us because he's not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I'd better kick the bucket then!"

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open against the juice jug.

"I think Divination seems very woolly," she said, searching for her page. "A lot of guesswork, if you ask me."

"There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!" said Ron hotly.

"You didn't seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a

sheep," said Hermione coolly.

"Professor Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura! You just don't like being bad at something for a change!"

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!"

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

"What's she talking about?" he said to Harry. "She hasn't been to an Arithmancy class yet."

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday's rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was only when he spotted three only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he realized they must be having these lessons with the Slytherins. Malfoy was talking animatedly to Crabbe and Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start.

"C'mon, now, get a move on!" he called as the class approached. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasant experiences in there to last him a lifetime. However, Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" he called. "That's it -- make sure yeh can see -- now, firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books --"

"How?" said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

"Eh?" said Hagrid.

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of The Monster Book of Monsters, which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.

"Hasn' -- hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

The class all shook their heads.

"Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Look --"

He took Hermione's copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine, and the book shivered, and then fell open and lay quiet in his hand.

"Oh, how silly we've all been!" Malfoy sneered. "We should have stroked them! why didn't we guess!"

"I -- I thought they were funny," Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

"Oh, tremendously funny!" said Malfoy. "Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid's first lesson to be a success.

"Righ' then," said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, "so -- so yeh've got yer books an' -- an' - - now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I'll go an' get 'em. Hang on... "

He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.

"God, this place is going to the dogs," said Malfoy loudly. "That oaf teaching classes, my father'll have a fit when I tell him

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry repeated.

"Careful, Potter, there's a dementor behind you

"Oooooooh!" squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly, orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

"Gee up, there!" he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

"Hippogriffs!" Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. "Beau'iful, aren' they?"

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was, half horse, half bird, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs' gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze,

pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

"So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer --"

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they were plotting how best to disrupt the lesson.

"Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt.

"Right -- who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this.

"No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, "Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!"

Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.

"Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then -- let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak."

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed maliciously.

"Easy) now, Harry," said Hagrid quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink.... Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much...."

Harry's eyes immediately began to water, but he didn't shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at Harry with one fierce orange eye. "Tha's it," said Hagrid. "Tha's it, Harry... now, bow."

Harry didn't feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow and then looked up.

The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn't move.

"Ah," said Hagrid, sounding worried. "Right -- back away, now, Harry, easy does it

But then, to Harry's enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

"Well done, Harry!" said Hagrid, ecstatic. "Right -- yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!"

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.

"Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid. "I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a hippogriff would be quite the same.

"Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," said Hagrid, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that...."

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers.

"Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriff's hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry, he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his Nimbus Two Thousand, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquarters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading; he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

"Good work, Harry!" roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. "Okay, who else wants a go?"

Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione practiced on the chestnut, while Harry watched.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking disdainful.

"This is very easy," Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to hear him.

"I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it.... I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he said to the hippogriff. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a highpitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

"I'm dying!" Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!"

"Yer not dyin'!" said Hagrid, who had gone very white. "Someone help me -- gotta get him outta here --"

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep gash on Malfoy's arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

"They should fire him straight away!" said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

"It was Malfoy's fault!" snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

"I'm going to see if he's okay!" said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

"You think he'll be all right?" said Hermione nervously.

"Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second," said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended magically by the nurse.

"That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid's first class, though, wasn't it?" said Ron, looking worried. "Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him...."

They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinnertime, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn't there.

"They wouldn't fire him, would they?" said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and- kidney pudding.

"They'd better not," said Ron, who wasn't eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. Harry was sure they were cooking up their own version of how Malfoy had been injured.

"Well, you can't say it wasn't an interesting first day back," said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, but all three of them kept breaking off and glancing Out of the tower window.

"There's a light on in Hagrid's window," Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

"If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It's still quite early..."

"I don't know," Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

"I'm allowed to walk across the grounds, " he said Pointedly. "Sirius Black hasn't got past the dementors yet, has he?"

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad to meet nobody on their way to the front doors, as they weren't entirely sure they were supposed to be out.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When

they reached Hagrid's hut, they knocked, and a voice growled, "C'min."

Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid's lap. One look told them that Hagrid had been drinking a lot; there was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them into focus.

"Spect it's a record," he said thickly, when he recognized them. "Don' reckon they've ever had a teacher who lasted on'y a day before."

"You haven't been fired, Hagrid!" gasped Hermione.

"Not yet," said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. "But's only a matter o' time, i' n't it, after Malfoy..."

"How is he?" said Ron as they all sat down. "It wasn't serious, was it?"

"Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could," said Hagrid dully, "but he's sayin' it's still agony... covered in bandages... moanin'..

"He's faking it, " said Harry at once. "Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust Malfoy to milk it for all it's worth."

"School gov'nors have bin told, o' course," said Hagrid miserably. "They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs fer later... done flobberworms or summat.... Jus' thought itdmake a good firs' lessons all my fault...."

"It's all Malfoy's fault, Hagrid!" said Hermione earnestly.

"We're witnesses," said Harry. "You said hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It's Malfoy's problem that he wasn't listening. We'll tell Dumbledore what really happened."

"Yeah, don't worry, Hagrid, we'll back you up," said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them into a bone-breaking hug.

"I think you've had enough to drink, Hagrid," said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went outside to empty it.

"At, maybe she's right," said Hagrid, letting go of Harry and Ron, who both staggered away, rubbing their ribs. Hagrid heaved himself out of his chair and followed Hermione unsteadily outside. They heard a loud splash.

"What's he done?" said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

"Stuck his head in the water barrel," said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water out of his eyes.

"That's better," he said, shaking his head like a dog and drenching them all. "Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an' see me, I really --"

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he'd only just realized he was there.

"WHAT D'YEH THINK YOU'RE DOIN', EH?" he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. "YEH'RE NOT TO GO WANDERIN' AROUND AFTER DARK,
HARRY! AN, YOU TWO! LETTIN' HIM!"

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

"C'mon!" Hagrid said angrily. "I'm takin' yer all back up ter school, an' don' let me catch yeh walkin' down ter see me after dark again. I'm not worth that!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOGGART IN THE WARDROBE

Malfoy didn't reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through double Potions. He swaggered into the dungeon, his right arm covered in bandages and bound up in a sling, acting, in Harry's opinion, as though he were the heroic survivor of some dreadful battle.

"How is it, Draco?" simpered Pansy Parkinson. "Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace. But Harry saw him wink at Crabbe and Goyle when Pansy had looked away.

"Settle down, settle down," said Professor Snape idly.

Harry and Ron scowled at each other; Snape wouldn't have said "settle down" if they'd walked in late, he'd have given them detention. But Malfoy had always been able to get away with anything in Snape's classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generality favored his own students above all others.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, so that they were preparing their ingredients on the same table.

"Sir," Malfoy called, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm --"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Ron seized his knife, pulled Malfoy's roots toward him, and began to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

"Professor," drawled Malfoy, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sit."

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, then gave Ron an unpleasant smile from beneath his long, greasy black hair.

"Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But, sit --!"

Ron had spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

"Now," said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table at Malfoy, then took up the knife again.

"And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned," said Malfoy, his voice full of malicious laughter.

"Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig," said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved just for him.

Harry took Malfoy's shrivelfig as Ron began trying to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shrivelfig as fast as he could and flung it back across the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

"Seen your pal Hagrid lately?" he asked them quietly.

"None of your business," said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. "Father's not very happy about my injury --"

"Keep talking, Malfoy, and I'll give you a real injury," snarled Ron.

"- he's complained to the school governors. And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know. And a lasting injury like this" -- he gave a huge, fake sigh -- "who knows if my arm'll ever

be the same again?"

"So that's why you're putting it on," said Harry, accidentally beheading a dead caterpillar because his hand was shaking in anger. "To try to get Hagrid fired."

"Well," said Malfoy, lowering his voice to a whisper, "partly, Potter. But there are other benefits too. Weasley, slice my caterpillars for me."

A few cauldrons away, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject, and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned --

"Orange, Longbottom," said Snape, ladling some up and allowing to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see.

"Orange. Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn't you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one -tat spleen was needed? Didn't I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

"Please, sir," said Hermione, "please, I could help Neville put it right --"

"I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. "Longbottom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

"Help me!" he moaned to Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? Daily Prophet this morning -- they reckon

Sirius Black's been sighted."

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand. The Muggles think he's just an ordinary criminal, don't they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here..." Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching closely. "What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?"

But Malfoy's eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed Harry. He leaned across the table.

Black single-handed, Potter?"

"Thinking Of trying to catch

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry offhandedly.

Malfoys thin mouth was curving in a mean smile.

"Of course, if it was me," he said quietly, "I'd have done something before now. I wouldn't be staying in school like a good boy, I'd be out there looking for him."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron roughly.

"Don't you know, Potter?" breathed Malfoy, his pate eyes narrowed.

"Know what?"

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

"Maybe you'd rather not risk your neck," he said. "Want to leave it to the dementors, do you? But if it was me, I'd want revenge. I'd hunt him

down myself."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry angrily, but at that moment Snape called, "You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we'll test Longbottom's... "

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering instructions to him out of the corner of her mouth, so that Snape wouldn't see. Harry and Ron packed away their unused ingredients and went to wash their hands and ladles in the stone basin in the corner.

"What did Malfoy mean?" Harry muttered to Ron as he stuck his hands under the icy jet that poured from the gargoyles' mouth "Why would I want revenge on Black? He hasn't done anything to me -- yet.

"He's making it up," said Ron savagely. "He's trying to make you do something stupid...."

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

"Everyone gather 'round," said Snape, his black eyes glittering, and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he has managed to produce a Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned."

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked excited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dipped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of hushed silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small pop, and Trevor the tadpole was wriggling in Snape's palm.

The Gryffindors burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a few drops on top of Trevor, and he reappeared suddenly, fully grown.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Class dismissed."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Harry was still thinking about what Malfoy had said, while Ron was seething about Snape.

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right!

Why didn't You lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville did it all by himself!"

Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watching the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

"She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared.

"There she is," said Harry.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something down the front of her robes.

"How did you do that?" said Ron.

"What?" said Hermione, joining them.

"One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again."

"What?" Hermione looked slightly confused. "Oh -- I had to go back for something. Oh no --"

A seam had split on Hermione's bag. Harry wasn't surprised; he could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen large and heavy books.

"Why are you carrying all these around with you?" Ron asked her.

"You know how many subjects I'm taking," said Hermione breathlessly. "Couldn't hold these for me, could you?"

"But --" Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. "You haven't got any of these subjects today. It's only Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon."

"Oh yes," said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. "I hope there's something good for lunch, I'm starving," she added, and she marched off toward the Great Hall.

"D'you get the feeling Hermione's not telling us something?" Ron asked Harry.

Professor Lupin wasn't there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, took out their books, quills, and parchment, and were talking when he finally entered the room. Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher's desk. He was as shabby as ever but looked healthier than he had on the train, as though he had had a few square meals.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts before, unless you counted the memorable class last year when their old teacher had brought a cageful of pixies -to class and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and

around a corner, where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn't look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song.

"Loony, loopy Lupin," Peeves sang. "Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy Lupin --"

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to their surprise, he was still smiling.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get in to his brooms."

Filch was the Hogwarts caretaker, a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students and, indeed, Peeves. However, Peeves paid no attention to Professor Lupin's words, except to blow a loud wet raspberry.

Professor Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand.

"This is a useful little spell, he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, "Waddiwasi!" and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves's left nostril; he whirled upright and zoomed away, cursing.

"Cool, sit!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Professor Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"

They set off again, the class looking at shabby Professor Lupin with increased respect. He led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom door.

"Inside, please," said Professor Lupin, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Professor Snape was sitting in a low armchair, and he looked around as the class filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a nasty sneer playing around his mouth. As Professor Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this."

He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes billowing behind him. At the doorway he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Neville went scarlet. Harry glared at Snape; it was bad enough that he bullied Neville in his own classes, let alone doing it in front of other teachers.

Professor Lupin had raised his eyebrows.

"I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said, "and I am sure he will perform it admirably."

Neville's face went, if possible, even redder. Snape's lip curled, but he left, shutting the door with a snap.

"Now, then," said Professor Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

"Nothing to worry about," said Professor Lupin calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. "There's a boggart in there."

Most people seemed to feel that this was something to worry about.

Neville gave Professor Lupin a look of pure terror, and Seamus Finnigan eyed the now rattling doorknob apprehensively.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks -- I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. This one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice.

"So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what is a boggart?"

Hermione put up her hand.

"It's a shape-shifter," she said. "It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears.

"This means," said Professor Lupin, choosing to ignore Neville's 'mall sputter of terror, "that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?"

Trying to answer a question with Hermione next to him, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, was very off-putting, but Harry had a go.

"Er -- because there are so many of us, it won't know what shape it should be?"

"Precisely," said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed. "It's always best to have com pany when you're dealing with a boggart. He becomes confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake -- tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening.

"The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.

"We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please ... Riddikulus!"

"Riddikulus!" said the class together.

"Good," said Professor Lupin. "Very good. But that was the easy part, I'm afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville."

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Neville, who walked forward as though he were heading for the gallows.

"Right, Neville," said Professor Lupin. "First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?"

Neville's lips moved, but no noise came out.

"didn't catch that, Neville, sorry," said Professor Lupin cheerfully.

Neville looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him, then said, in barely more than a whisper, "Professor Snape."

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically. Professor Lupin, however, looked thoughtful.

"Professor Snape... hmmm... Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?"

"Er -- yes," said Neville nervously. "But -- I don't want the boggart to turn into her either."

"No, no, you misunderstand me," said Professor Lupin, now smiling. "I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?"

Neville looked startled, but said, "Well... always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress... green, normally... and sometimes a fox-fur scarf."

"And a handbag?" prompted Professor Lupin.

"A big red one," said Neville.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin. "Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind's eye?"

"Yes," said Neville uncertainty, plainly wondering what was coming next.

"When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees You, it will assume the form of Professor Snape," said Lupin. "And You will raise your wand -- thus -- and cry 'Riddikulus' -- and concentrate hard on your grandmother's clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag."

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

"If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical...."

The room went quiet. Harry thought... 'What scared him most in the world?

His first thought was Lord Voldemort -- a Voldemort returned to full strength. But before he had even started to plan a possible counterattack on a boggart-Voldemort, a horrible image came floating to the surface of his mind....

A rotting, glistening hand, slithering back beneath a black cloak ... a long, rattling breath from an unseen mouth... then a cold so penetrating it felt like drowning....

Harry shivered, then looked around, hoping no one had noticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron was muttering to himself, "Take its legs off " Harry was sure he knew what that was about. Ron's greatest fear was spiders.

"Everyone ready?" said Professor Lupin.

Harry felt a lurch of fear. He wasn't ready. How could you make a dementor less frightening? But he didn't want to ask for more time; everyone else was nodding and rolling up their sleeves.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Professor Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person forward.... Everyone back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot --"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready.

"On the count of three, Neville," said Professor Lupin, who was

pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One two -- three -- now!"

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"R -- r -- riddikulus! "squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Parvati walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a bloodstained, bandaged mummy; its sightless face was turned to Parvati and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising --

"Riddikulus!" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floorlength black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face -- a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Harry's head stand on end -- 'Riddikulus!' shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then -- crack!- became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before -- crack! -- becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

'It's confused!' shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"Riddikulus!" yelled Dean.

'There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers menacingly. For a moment, Harry thought Ron had frozen. Then --

"Riddikulus!" bellowed Ron, and the spider's legs vanished; it rolled over and over; Lavender Brown squealed and ran out of its way and it came to a halt at Harry's feet. He raised his wand, ready, but --

"Here!" shouted Professor Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward. Crack!

The legless spider had vanished. For a second, everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a silvery-white orb hanging in the air in front of Lupin, who said, "Riddikulus!" almost lazily.

Crack!

"Forward, Neville, and finish him off!" said Lupin as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. Crack! Snape was back. This time Neville charged forward looking determined.

"Riddikulus!" he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great "Ha!" of laughter, and the boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

"Excellent!" cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause. "Excellent) Neville. Well done, everyone.... Let me See... five points to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the boggart -- ten for Neville because he did it twice... and five each to Hermione and Harry."

"But I didn't do anything," said Harry.

"You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the class, Harry," Lupin said lightly. "Very well, everyone, an excellent lesson. Homework, kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarize it for me... to be handed in on Monday. That will be all."

Talking excitedly, the class left the staffroom. Harry, however, wasn't feeling cheerful. Professor Lupin had deliberately stopped him from tackling the boggart. Why? Was it because he'd seen Harry collapse on the train, and thought he wasn't up to much? Had he thought Harry would pass out again?

But no one else seemed to have noticed anything.

"Did you see me take that banshee?" shouted Seamus. "And the hand!" said Dean, waving his own around.

"And Snape in that hat!" "And my mummy!"

I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" said Lavender thoughtfully.

"That was the best Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson we've ever had, wasn't it?" said Ron excitedly as they made their way back to the classroom to get their bags.

"He seems like a very good teacher," said Hermione approvingly. "But I wish I could have had a turn with the boggart --"

"What would it have been for you?" said Ron, sniggering. "A piece of homework that only got nine out of ten?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLIGHT OF THE FAT FADY

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins had anything bad to say about Professor Lupin.

"Look at the state of his robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. "He dresses like our old houseelf "

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first.

After boggarts, they studied Red Caps, nasty little goblin like creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps they moved on to kappas, creepy, water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Harry only wished he was as happy with some of his other classes. Worst of all was Potions. Snape was in a particularly vindictive mood these days, and no one was in any doubt why. The story of the boggart assuming Snape's shape, and the way that Neville had dressed it in his grandmother's clothes, had traveled through the school like wildfire. Snape didn't seem to find it funny. His eyes flashed menacingly at the very mention of Professor Lupin's name, and he was bullying Neville worse than ever.

Harry was also growing to dread the hours he spent in Professor Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided shapes and symbols, trying to ignore the way Professor Trelawney's enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect bordering on reverence by many of the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower room at lunch times, and always returned with annoyingly superior looks on their faces, as though they knew things the others didn't. They had also started using hushed voices whenever they spoke to Harry, as though he were on his deathbed.

Nobody really liked Care of Magical Creatures, which, after the action-packed first class, had become extremely dull. Hagrid seemed to have lost his confidence. They were now spending lesson after lesson learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in existence.

"Why would anyone bother looking after them?" said Ron, after yet another hour of poking shredded lettuce down the flobberworms' throats.

At the start of October, however, Harry had something else to occupy him, something so enjoyable it more than made up for his unsatisfactory classes. The Quidditch season was approaching, and Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor team, called a meeting on Thursday evening to discuss

tactics for the new season.

There were seven people on a Quidditch team: three Chasers, whose job it was to score goals by putting the Quaffle (a red, soccer-sized ball) through one of the fifty-foot-high hoops at each

end of the field; two Beaters, who were equipped with heavy bats to repel the Bludgers (two heavy black balls that zoomed around trying to attack the players); a Keeper, who defended the goal

posts, and the Seeker, who had the hardest job of all, that of catching the Golden Snitch, a tiny, winged, walnut-sized ball, whose capture ended the game and earned the Seeker's team an extra one hundred and fifty points.

Oliver Wood was a burly seventeen-year-old, now in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. There was a quiet sort of desperation in his voice as he addressed his six fellow team members in the chilly locker rooms on the edge of the darkening Quidditch field.

"This is our last chance -- my last chance -- to win the Quidditch Cup," he told them, striding up and down in front of them. "I'll be leaving at the end of this year. I'll never get another shot at it."

"Gryffindor hasn't won for seven years now. Okay, so we've had the worst luck in the world -- injuries -- then the tournament getting called off last year Wood swallowed, as though the memory still brought a lump to his throat. "But we also know we've got the best-ruddy-team-in-the-school," he said, punching a fist into his other hand, the old manic glint back in his eye. "We've got three superb Chasers."

Wood pointed at Alicia Spinner, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell.

"We've got two unbeatable Beaters."

"Stop it, Oliver, you're embarrassing us," said Fred and George Weasley together, pretending to blush.

"And we've got a Seeker who has never failed to win us a match!" Wood

rumbled, glaring at Harry with a kind of furious pride. "And me," he added as an afterthought.

"We think you're very good too, Oliver," said George.

"Spanking good Keeper," said Fred.

"The point is," Wood went on, resuming his pacing, "the Quidditch Cup should have had our name on it these last two years. Ever since Harry joined the team, I've thought the thing was in the bag. But we haven't got it, and this year's the last chance we'll get to finally see our name on the thing...."

Wood spoke so dejectedly that even Fred and George looked sympathetic.

"Oliver, this year's our year," said Fred.

"We'll do it, Oliver!" said Angelina.

"Definitely," said Harry.

Full of determination, the team started training sessions, three evenings a week. The weather was getting colder and wetter, the nights darker, but no amount of mud, wind, or rain could tarnish Harry's wonderful vision of finally winning the huge, silver Quidditch Cup.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room one evening after training, cold and stiff but pleased with the way practice had gone, to find the room buzzing excitedly.

"What's happened?", he asked Ron and Hermione, who were sitting in two of the best chairs by the fireside and completing some star charts for Astronomy.

"First Hogsmeade weekend," said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. "End of October. Halloween."

"Excellent," said Fred, who had followed Harry through the portrait hole. "I need to visit Zonko's. I'm nearly out of Stink Pellets."

Harry threw himself into a chair beside Ron, his high spirits ebbing away. Hermione seemed to read his mind.

"Harry, I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "They're bound to catch Black soon. He's been sighted once already."

"Black's not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The next one might not be for ages --"

"Ron!" said Hermione. "Harry's supposed to stay in school--"

"He can't be the only third year left behind," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry --"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Harry, making up his mind.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks leapt lightly onto her lap. A large, dead spider was dangling from his mouth.

"Does he have to eat that in front of us?" said Ron, scowling.

"Clever Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?" said Hermione.

Crookshanks; slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

"Just keep him over there, that's all," said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. "I've got Scabbers asleep in my bag."

Harry yawned. He really wanted to go to bed, but he still had his own star chart to complete. He pulled his bag toward him, took out parchment, ink, and quill, and started work.

"You can copy mine, if you like," said Ron, labeling his last star with a flourish and shoving the chart toward Harry.

Hermione, who disapproved of copying, pursed her lips but didn't say anything. Crookshanks was still staring unblinkingly at Ron, flicking

the end of his bushy tail. Then, without warning, he pounced.

"OY!" Ron roared, seizing his bag as Crookshanks sank four sets of claws deep inside it and began tearing ferociously. "GET OFF, YOU STUPID ANIMAL!"

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crookshanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

"Ron, don't hurt him!" squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Crookshanks still clinging to it, and Scabbers came flying out of the top -

"CATCH THAT CAR' Ron yelled as Crookshanks freed himself from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, and chased after the terrified Scabbers.

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and shot beneath an old chest of drawers. Crookshanks skidded to a halt, crouched low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crookshanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron threw himself onto his stomach and, with great difficulty, pulled Scabbers out by the tail.

"Look at him!" he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scabbers in front of her. "He's skin and bone! You keep that cat away from him!"

"Crookshanks doesn't understand it's wrong!" said Hermione, her voice shaking. "All cats chase rats, Ron!"

"There's something funny about that animal!" said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers back into his pocket. "It heard me say that Scabbers was in my bag!"

"Oh, what rubbish," said Hermione impatiently. "Crookshanks could smell him, Ron, how else d'you think --"

"That cat's got it in for Scabbers!" said Ron, 'ignoring the people

around him, who were starting to giggle. "And Scabbers was here first, and he's ill!"

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he, Harry, and Hermione were working together on the same puffapod.

"How's Scabbers?" Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining beans into a wooden pail.

"He's hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking," said Ron angrily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the greenhouse floor.

"Careful, Weasley, careful!" cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Harry, who had resolved to ask Professor McGonagall after the lesson whether he could go into Hogsmeade with the rest, joined the line outside the class trying to decide how he was going to argue his case. He was distracted, however, by a disturbance at the front of the line.

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were looking very serious.

"What's the matter, Lavender?" said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, and Ron went to join the group.

"She got a letter from home this morning," Parvati whispered. "It's her rabbit, Binky. He's been killed by a fox."

"Oh," said Hermione, "I'm sorry, Lavender."

"I should have known!" said Lavender tragically. "You know what day it is?"

"Er --"

"The sixteenth of October! 'That thing you're dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!' Remember? She was right, she was right!"

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then she said, "You -- you were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?"

"Well, not necessarily by a fox," said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, "but I was obviously dreading him dying, wasn't I?"

"Oh," said Hermione. She paused again. Then

"Was Binky an old rabbit?"

"N -- no!" sobbed Lavender. "H -- he was only a baby!"

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender's shoulders.

"But then, why would you dread him dying?" said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

"Well, look at it logically," said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group- "I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today-" Lavender wailed loudly. "- and she can't have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock --"

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," said Ron loudly, "she doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that moment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were looking daggers at each other, and when they got into class, they seated themselves on either side of Harry and didn't talk to each other for the whole class.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was going to say to Professor McGonagall when the bell rang at the end of the lesson, but it was she who brought up the subject of Hogsmeade first.

"One moment, please !" she called as the class made to leave. "As you're all in my House, you should hand Hogsmeade permission forms to me before Halloween. No form, no visiting the village, so don't forget!"

Neville put up his hand.

"Please, Professor, I -- I think I've lost

"Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom," said Professor McGonagall. "She seemed to think it was safer. Well, that's all, you may leave."

"Ask her now," Ron hissed at Harry.

"Oh. but --" Hermione began.

"Go for it, Harry," said Ron stubbornly.

Harry waited for the rest of the class to disappear, then headed nervously for Professor McGonagall's desk.

"Yes, Potter?" Harry took a deep breath.

"Professor, my aunt and uncle -- er -- forgot to sign my form," he said.

Professor McGonagall looked over her square spectacles at him but didn't say anything.

"So -- er d'you think it would be all right mean, will It be okay if I -- if I go to Hogsmeade?"

Professor McGonagall looked down and began shuffling papers on her desk.

"I'm afraid not, Potter," she said. "You heard what I said. No form, no visiting the village. That's the rule."

"But -- Professor, my aunt and uncle -- you know, they're Muggles, they don't really understand about -- about Hogwarts forms and stuff," Harry said, while Ron egged him on with vigorous nods. "If you said I could go

--"

"But I don't say so," said Professor McGonagall, standing up and piling her papers neatly into a drawer. "The form clearly states that the parent or guardian must give permission." She turned to look at him, with an odd expression on her face. Was it pity? "I'm sorry, Potter, but that's my final word. You had better hurry, or you'll be late for your next lesson."

There was nothing to be done. Ron called Professor McGonagall a lot of names that greatly annoyed Hermione; Hermione assumed an "all-for-the-best" expression that made Ron even angrier, and Harry had to endure everyone in the class talking loudly and happily about what they were going to do first, once they got into Hogsmeade.

"There's always the feast," said Ron, in an effort to cheer Harry UP. "You know, the Halloween feast, in the evening."

"Yeah," said Harry gloomily, "great."

The Halloween feast was always good, but it would taste a lot better if he was coming to it after a day in Hogsmeade with everyone else. Nothing anyone said made him feel any better about being left behind. Dean Thomas, who was good with a quill, had offered to forge Uncle Vernon's signature on the form, but as Harry had already told Professor McGonagall he hadn't had it signed, that was no good. Ron halfheartedly suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione stamped on that one, reminding Ron what Dumbledore had told them about the dementors being able to see through them. Percy had what were possibly the least helpful words of comfort.

"They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said seriously. "All right, the sweetshop's rather good, and Zonko's Joke Shop's frankly dangerous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack's always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you're not missing anything."

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, feeling thoroughly depressed, though doing his best to act normally.

"We'll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes," said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

"Yeah, loads," said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry's difficulties.

"Don't worry about me," said Harry, in what he hoped was an offhand voice, "I'll see you at the feast. Have a good time."

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking off names against a long list, peering suspiciously into every face, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn't be going.

"Staying here, Potter?" shouted Malfoy, who was standing in line with Crabbe and Goyle. "Scared of passing the dementors?"

Harry ignored him and made his solitary way up the marble staircase, through the deserted corridors, and back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Password?" said the Fat Lady, jerking out of a doze.

"Fortuna Major," said Harry listlessly.

The portrait swung open and he climbed through the hole into the common room. It was full of chattering first and second years, and a few older students, who had obviously visited Hogsmeade so often the novelty had worn off.

"Harry! Harry! Hi, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a second year who was deeply in awe of Harry and never missed an opportunity to speak to him.

"Aren't you going to Hogsmeade, Harry? Why not? Hey" -- Colin looked eagerly around at his friends -- "you can come and sit with us, if you like, Harry!"

"Er -- no, thanks, Colin," said Harry, who wasn't in the mood to have a

lot of people staring avidly at the scar on his forehead. "I -- I've got to go to the library, got to get some work done."

After that, he had no choice but to turn right around and head back out of the portrait hole again.

"What was the point waking me up?" the Fat Lady called grumpily after him as he walked away.

Harry wandered dispiritedly toward the library, but halfway there he changed his mind; he didn't feel like working. He turned around and came face-to-face with Filch, who had obviously just seen off the last of the Hogsmeade visitors.

"What are you doing?" Filch snarled suspiciously.

"Nothing," said Harry truthfully.

"Nothing!" spat Filch, his jowls quivering unpleasantly. "A likely story! Sneaking around on your own -- why aren't you in Hogsmeade buying Stink Pellets and Belch Powder and Whizzing Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well, get back to your common room where you belong!" snapped Filch, and he stood glaring until Harry had passed out of sight.

But Harry didn't go back to the common room; he climbed a staircase, thinking vaguely of visiting the Owlery to see Hedwig, and was walking along another corridor when a voice from inside one of the rooms said, "Harry?"

Harry doubled back to see who had spoken and met Professor Lupin, looking around his office door.

"What are you doing?" said Lupin, though in a very different voice from Filch. "Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Hogsmeade," said Harry, in a would-be casual voice.

"Ah," said Lupin. He considered Harry for a moment. "Why don't you come in? I've just taken delivery of a grindylow for our next lesson." "A what?" said Harry. I

He followed Lupin into his office. In the corner stood a very large tank of water. A sickly green creature with sharp little horns had its face pressed against the glass, pulling faces and flexing its long, spindly fingers.

"Water demon," said Lupin, surveying the grindylow thoughtfully. "We shouldn't have much difficulty with him, not after the kappas. The trick is to break his grip. You notice the abnormally long fingers? Strong, but very brittle."

The grindylow bared its green teeth and then buried itself in a tangle of weeds in a corner.

"Cup of tea?" Lupin said, looking around for his kettle. "I was just thinking of making one."

"All right," said Harry awkwardly.

Lupin tapped the kettle with his wand and a blast of steam issued suddenly from the spout.

"Sit down," said Lupin, taking the lid off a dusty tin. "I've only got teabags, I'm afraid -- but I daresay you've had enough of tea leaves?"

Harry looked at him. Lupin's eyes were twinkling.

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked.

"Professor McGonagall told me," said Lupin, passing Harry a chipped mug of tea. "You're not worried, are you?"

"No," said Harry.

He thought for a moment of telling Lupin about the dog he'd seen in Magnolia Crescent but decided not to. He didn't want Lupin to think he

was a coward, especially since Lupin already seemed to think he couldn't cope with a boggart.

Something of Harry's thoughts seemed to have shown on his face, because Lupin said, "Anything worrying you, Harry?"

"No," Harry lied. He drank a bit of tea and watched the grindy low brandishing a fist at him. "Yes," he said suddenly, putting his tea down on Lupin's desk. "You know that day we fought the boggart?"

"Yes," said Lupin slowly.

"Why didn't you let me fight it?" said Harry abruptly.

Lupin raised his eyebrows.

"I would have thought that was obvious, Harry," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, frowning slightly, "I assumed that if the boggart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort."

Harry stared. Not only was this the last answer he'd expected, but Lupin had said Voldemort's name. The only person Harry had ever heard say the name aloud (apart from himself) was Professor Dumbledore.

"Clearly, I was wrong," said Lupin, still frowning at Harry. "But I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialize in the staffroom. I imagined that people would panic."

"I didn't think of Voldemort," said Harry honestly. "I -- I remembered those dementors."

"I see," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Well, well... I'm impressed." He smiled slightly at the look of surprise on Harry's face. "That suggests

that what you fear most of all is -- fear. Very wise, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he drank some mot,, tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly.

"Well... yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot happier.
"Professor Lupin, you know the dementors --"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Lupin.

The door opened, and in came Snape. He was carrying a goblet, which was smoking faintly, and stopped at the sight of Harry, his black eyes narrowing.

"Ah, Severus," said Lupin, smiling. "Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me?"

Snape set down the smoking goblet, his eyes wandering between Harry and Lupin.

"I was just showing Harry my grindylow," said Lupin pleasantly, pointing at the tank.

"Fascinating," said Snape, without looking at it. "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

"Yes, Yes, I will," said Lupin.

"I made an entire cauldronful," Snape continued. "If you need more.

"I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all," said Snape, but there was a look in his eye Harry didn't like. He backed out of the room, unsmiling and watchful.

Harry looked curiously at the goblet. Lupin smiled.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he said. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex." He picked up the goblet and sniffed it. "Pity sugar makes it useless," he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

"Why --?" Harry began. Lupin looked at him and answered the unfinished question.

"I've been feeling a bit off-color," he said. "This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working alongside Professor Snape; there aren't many wizards who are up to making it."

Professor Lupin took another sip and Harry had a crazy urge to knock the goblet out of his hands.

"Professor Snape's very interested in the Dark Arts, he blurted out.

"Really?" said Lupin, looking only mildly interested as he took another gulp of potion.

"Some people reckon --" Harry hesitated, then plunged recklessly on, "some people reckon he'd do anything to get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job."

Lupin drained the goblet and pulled a face.

"Disgusting," he said. "Well, Harry, I'd better get back to work. see you at the feast later."

"Right," said Harry, putting down his empty teacup.

The empty goblet was still smoking.

"There you go," said Ron. "We got as much as we could carry."

A shower of brilliantly colored sweets fell into Harry's lap. It was dusk, and Ron and Hermione had just turned up in the common room, pink-faced from the cold wind and looking as though they'd had the time of their lives.

"Thanks," said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. "What's Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?"

By the sound of it -- everywhere. Dervish and Banges, the wizarding equipment shop, Zonko's Joke Shop, into the Three Broomsticks for foaming mugs of hot butterbeer, and many places besides.

"The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want your letter to get there!"

"Honeydukes has got a new kind of fudge; they were giving out free samples, there's a bit, look --"

"We think we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks --"

"Wish we could have brought you some butterbeer, really warms you up --"

"What did you do?" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Did you get any work done?"

"No," said Harry. "Lupin made me a cup of tea in his office. And then Snape came in...."

He told them all about the goblet. Ron's mouth fell open.

"Lupin drank it?" he gasped. "Is he mad?"

Hermione checked her watch.

"We'd better go down, you know, the feast'll be starting in fiveminutes They hurried through the portrait hole and into the crowd, still discussing Snape.

"But if he -- you know" -- Hermione dropped her voice, glancing nervously around -- "if he was trying to poison Lupin -- he wouldn't have done it in front of Harry."

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant watersnakes.

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second helpings of everything. Harry kept glancing at the staff table. Professor Lupin

looked cheerful and as well as he ever did; he was talking animatedly to tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher. Harry moved his eyes along the table, to the place where Snape sat. Was he imagining it, or were Snape's eyes flickering toward Lupin more often than was natural?

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding; Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched beheading.

It had been such a pleasant evening that Harry's good mood couldn't even be spoiled by Malfoy, who shouted through the crowd as they all left the hall, "The dementors send their love, Potter!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to Gryffindor Tower, but when they reached the corridor that ended with the portrait of the Fat Lady, they found it jammed with students.

"Why isn't anyone going in?" said Ron curiously.

Harry peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

"Let me through, please," came Percy's voice, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. "What's the holdup here? You can't all have forgotten the password -- excuse me, I'm Head Boy --"

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They heard Percy say, in a

suddenly sharp voice, "Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick."

People's heads turned; those at the back were standing on tiptoe.

"What's going on?" said Ginny, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors squeezed together to let him through, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer to see what the trouble was.

"Oh, my --" Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor; great chunks of it had been torn away completely.

Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Snape hurrying toward him.

"We need to find her," said Dumbledore. "Professor McGonagall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search every painting in the castle for the Fat Lady."

"You'll be lucky!" said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and looking delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage or worry.

"What do you mean, Peeves?" said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeves's grin faded a little. He didn't dare taunt Dumbledore. Instead he adopted an oily voice that was no better than his cackle. "Ashamed, Your Headship, sit. Doesn't want to be seen. She's a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful," he said happily. "Poor thing," he added unconvincingly.

"Did she say who did it?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Oh yes, Professorhead," said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a

large bombshell in his arms. "He got very angry when she wouldn't let him in, you see." Peeves flipped over and grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. "Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

CHAPTER NINE

GRIM DEFEAT

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, who all looked extremely confused.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Professor Dumbledore told them as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrances to the hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and important. "Send word with one of the ghosts."

Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing..."

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Percy. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Ron said to Harry and Hermione; they seized three sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione whispered

anxiously.

"Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be," said Ron.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves on their elbows to talk. "The one night we weren't in the tower...."

I reckon he's lost track of time, being on the run," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come bursting in here."

Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: "How did he get in?"

"Maybe he knows how to Apparate," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away, "Just appear out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year. "He could've flown in," suggested Dean Thomas.

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever bothered to read Hogwarts, A History?" said Hermione crossly to Harry and Ron.

"Probably," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than walls, You know,,, said Hermione. "There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can't just Apparate in here. And I'd like to see the disguise that could fool those dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the grounds. They'd have seen him fly in too. And Fitch knows all the secret passages, they'll have them covered...."

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was

scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry felt as though he were sleeping outdoors in a light wind.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had finally fallen asleep, Professor Dumbledore came in. Harry watched him looking around for Percy, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. Percy was only a short way away from Harry, Ron, and Hermlone, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

"Headmaster?" It was Snape. Harry kept quite still, listening hard. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either."

"What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched."

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape.

Harry raised his head very slightly off his arms to free his other ear,

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next."

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where they stood; Dumbledore's back was to him, but he could see Percy's face, rapt with attention, and Snape's profile, which looked angry.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before -- ah -- the start of term?" said Snape, who was barely opening his lips, as though trying to block Percy out of the conversation.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"It seems -- almost impossible -- that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed --"

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn't reply. "I must go down to the dementors," said Dumbledore. "I said I would inform them when our search was complete."

"Didn't they want to help, sir?" said Percy.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster."

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione. Both of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

"What was all that about?" Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle became wilder and wilder; Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, spent much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who'd listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and

Replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gray pony. Nobody was very happy about this. Sir Cadogan spent half his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated passwords, which he changed at least twice a day.

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Frightened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan was the only one brave enough to volunteer."

Sir Cadogan, however, was the least of Harry's worries. He was now being closely watched. Teachers found excuses to walk along corridors with him, and Percy Weasley (acting, Harry suspected, on his mother's orders) was tailing him everywhere like an extremely pompous guard dog. To cap it all, Professor McGonagall summoned Harry into her office, with such a somber expression on her face Harry thought someone must have died.

"There's no point hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said in a very serious voice. "I know this will come as a shock to you, but Sirius Black --"

"I know he's after me," said Harry wearily. "I heard Ron's dad telling his mum. Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic."

Professor McGonagall seemed very taken aback. She stared at Harry for a moment or two, then said, "I see! Well, in that case, Potter, you'll understand why I don't think it's a good idea for you to be practicing

Quidditch in the evenings. Out on the field with only Your team members, it's very exposed, Potter --"

"We've got our first match on Saturday!" said Harry, outraged. "I've got to train, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall considered him intently. Harry knew she was deeply interested in the Gryffindor team's prospects; it had been she, after all, who'd suggested him as Seeker in the first Place. He waited, holding his breath.

"Hmm..." Professor McGonagall stood up and stared out of the window at the Quidditch field, just visible through the rain. "Well... goodness knows, I'd like to see us win the Cup at last... but all the same, Potter... I'd be happier if a teacher were present. I'll ask Madam Hooch to oversee your training sessions."

The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Gryffindor team was training harder than ever under the eye of Madam Hooch. Then, at their final training session before Saturday's match, Oliver Wood gave his team some unwelcome news.

"We're not playing Slytherin!" he told them, looking very angry. "Flint's just been to see me. We're playing Hufflepuff instead."

"Why?" chorused the rest of the team.

"Flint's excuse is that their Seeker's arm's still injured," said Wood, grinding his teeth furiously. "But it's obvious why they're doing it. Don't want to play in this weather. Think it'll damage their chances...."

There had been strong winds and heavy rain all day, and as Wood spoke, they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"There's nothing wrong with Malfoy's arm!" said Harry furiously. "He's faking it!"

"I know that, but we can't prove it," said Wood bitterly, "And we've been practicing all those moves assuming we're playing Slytherin, and

instead it's Hufflepuff, and their style's quite different. They've got a new Captain and Seeker, Cedric Diggory --"

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie suddenly giggled.

"What?" said Wood, frowning at this lighthearted behavior.

"He's that tall, good-looking one, isn't he?" said Angelina.

"Strong and silent," said Katie, and they started to giggle again.

"He's only silent because he's too thick to string two words together," said Fred impatiently. "I don't know why you're worried, Oliver, Hufflepuff is a pushover. Last time we played them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?"

"We were playing in completely different conditions!" Wood shouted, his eyes bulging slightly. "Diggory's put a very strong side together! He's an excellent Seeker! I was afraid you'd take it like this! We mustn't relax! We must keep our focus! Slytherin is trying to wrong-foot us! We must win!"

"Oliver, calm down!" said Fred, looking slightly alarmed. "We're taking Hufflepuff very seriously. Seriously."

The day before the match, the winds reached howling point and the rain fell harder than ever. It was so dark inside the corridors and classrooms that extra torches and lanterns were lit. The Slytherin team was looking very smug indeed, and none more so than Malfoy.

"Ah, if only my arm was feeling a bit better!" he sighed as the gale outside pounded the windows.

Harry had no room in his head to worry about anything except the match tomorrow. Oliver Wood kept hurrying up to him between classes and giving him tips. The third time this happened, Wood talked for so long that Harry suddenly realized he was ten minutes late for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and set off at a run with Wood shouting after him, "Diggory's got a very fast swerve, Harry, so you might want to try looping him --"

Harry skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulled the door open, and dashed inside.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin. I --"

But it wasn't Professor Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher's desk; it was Snape.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

But Harry didn't move.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" he said.

"He says he is feeling too ill to teach today," said Snape with a twisted smile. "I believe I told you to sit down?"

But Harry stayed where he was.

"What's wrong with him?"

Snape's black eyes glittered.

"Nothing life-threatening," he said, looking as though he wished it were. "Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty."

Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

"As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far --"

"Please, sir, we've done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindylows," said Hermione quickly, "and we're just about to start --"

"Be quiet," said Snape coldly. "I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin's lack of organization."

"He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had," said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. Snape looked more menacing than ever.

"You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you -- I ,Would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and grindylows. Today we shall discuss --"

Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn't covered.

"Werewolves," said Snape.

"But, sir," said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, "we're not supposed to do werewolves yet, we're due to start hinkypunks --"

"Miss Granger," said Snape in a voice of deadly calm, "I was under the impression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you all to turn to page 394." He glanced around again. 'All of you! Now!'

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?" said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it so often did, had shot straight into the air.

"Anyone?" Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. "Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't even taught you the basic distinction between --"

"We told you," said Parvati suddenly, "we haven't got as far as werewolves yet, we're still on --"

"Silence!" snarled Snape. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are...."

"Please, sir," said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, "the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf --"

"That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger," said Snape coolly. "Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all."

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all at least twice a week, said loudly, "You asked us a question and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don't want to be told?"

The class knew instantly he'd gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

"Detention, Weasley," Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron's. "And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed."

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Professor Lupin.

"Very poorly explained... That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia... Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn't have given it three...."

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

"You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment or, the subject, and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention."

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were well out of earshot, then burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

"Snape's never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job," Harry said to Hermione. "Why's he got it in for Lupin? D'you think this is all because of the boggart?"

"I don't know," said Hermione pensively. "But I really hope Professor Lupin gets better soon...."

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

"D'you know what that --" (he called Snape something that made Hermione say "Ron!") "-- is making me do? I've got to scrub out the bedpans in the hospital wing. Without magic!" He was breathing deeply, his fists clenched. "Why couldn't Black have hidden in Snape's office, eh? He could have finished him off for us!"

Harry woke extremely early the next morning; so early that it was till dark. For a moment he thought the roaring of the wind had woken him. Then he felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck and sat bolt upright -- Peeves the Poltergeist had been floating next to him, blowing hard in his ear.

"What did you do that for?" said Harry furiously. Peeves puffed out his cheeks, blew hard, and zoomed backward out of the room, cackling.

Harry fumbled for his alarm clock and looked at it. It was half past four. Cursing Peeves, he rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but it was very difficult, now that he was awake, to ignore the sounds of the thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, and the distant creaking of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. In a few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale. Finally, he gave up any thought of more sleep, got up, dressed, picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand, and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

As Harry opened the door, something brushed against his leg. He bent down just in time to grab Crookshanks by the end of his bushy tail and drag him outside.

"You know, I reckon Ron was right about you," Harry told Crookshanks suspiciously. "There are plenty of mice around this place -- go and chase them. Go on," he added, nudging Crookshanks down the spiral staircase with his foot. "Leave Scabbers alone."

The noise of the storm was even louder in the common room. Harry knew better than to think the match would be canceled; Quidditch matches weren't called off for trifles like thunderstorms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. Wood had pointed out Cedric Diggory to him in the corridor; Diggory was a fifth year and a lot bigger than Harry. Seekers were usually light

and speedy, but Diggory's weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off course.

Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire, getting up every now and then to stop Crookshanks from sneaking up

the boys, staircase again. At long last Harry thought it must be time for breakfast, so he headed through the portrait hole alone.

"Stand and fight, you mangy cur!" yelled Sir Cadogan.

"Oh, shut up," Harry yawned.

He revived a bit over a large bowl of porridge, and by the time he'd started on toast, the rest of the team had turned up.

"It's going to be a tough one," said Wood, who wasn't eating anything.

"Stop worrying, Oliver," said Alicia soothingly, "we don't mind a bit of rain."

But it was considerably more than a bit of rain. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quidditch field, heads

bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas being whipped out of their hands as they went. just before he entered the locker room, Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, laughing and pointing at him from under an enormous umbrella on their way to the stadium.

The team changed into their scarlet robes and waited for Wood's usual pre-match pep talk, but it didn't come. He tried to speak several times, made an odd gulping noise, then shook his head hopelessly and beckoned them to follow him.

The wind was so strong that they staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, they couldn't hear it over the fresh rolls of thunder. Rain was splattering over Harry's glasses. How on earth was he going to see the Snitch in this?

The Hufflepuffs were approaching from the opposite side of the field, wearing canary-yellow robes. The Captains walked up to each other and shook hands; Diggory smiled at Wood but Wood no, looked as though he had lockjaw and merely nodded. Harry saw Madam Hooch's mouth form the words, "Mount Your brooms.,, He pulled his right foot out of the mud with a squelch and swung it over his Nimbus Two Thousand. Madam Hooch put her whistle to her lips and gave it a blast that sounded shrill and distant they were off

Harry rose fast, but his Nimbus was swerving slightly with the wind. He held it as steady as he could and turned, squinting into the rain.

Within five minutes Harry was soaked to his skin and frozen, hardly able to see his teammates, let alone the tiny Snitch. He flew backward and forward across the field past blurred red and yellow shapes, with no idea of what was happening in the rest of the game. He couldn't hear the commentary over the wind. The crowd was hidden beneath a sea of cloaks and battered umbrellas. Twice Harry came very close to being unseated by a Bludger; his vision was so clouded by the rain on his glasses he hadn't seen them coming.

He lost track of time. It was getting harder and harder to hold his broom straight. The sky was getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. Twice Harry nearly hit another player, without knowing whether it was a teammate or opponent; everyone was now so wet, and the

rain so thick, he could hardly tell them apart....

With the first flash of lightning came the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle; Harry could just see the outline of Wood through the thick rain, gesturing him to the ground. The whole team splashed down into the mud.

"I called for time-out!" Wood roared at his team. "Come on, under here --"

They huddled at the edge of the field under a large umbrella; Harry took off his glasses and wiped them hurriedly on his robes.

"What's the score?"

"We're fifty points up," said Wood, "but unless we get the Snitch soon, we'll be playing into the night."

"I've got no chance with these on," Harry said exasperatedly, waving his glasses.

At that very moment, Hermione appeared at his shoulder; she was holding her cloak over her head and was, inexplicably, beaming.

"I've had an idea, Harry! Give me your glasses, quick!"

He handed them to her, and as the team watched in amazement, Hermione tapped them with her wand and said, "Impervius!"

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"

Wood looked as though he could have kissed her.

"Brilliant!" he called hoarsely after her as she disappeared into the crowd. "Okay, team, let's go for it!"

Hermione's spell had done the trick. Harry was still numb with cold, still wetter than he'd ever been in his life, but he could see. Full of fresh determination, he urged his broom through the turbulent air, staring in every direction for the Snitch, avoiding a Bludger, ducking

beneath Diggory, who was streaking in the opposite direction....

There was another clap of thunder, followed immediately by forked lightning. This was getting more and more dangerous. Harry needed to get the Snitch quickly -

He turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field, but at that moment, another flash of lightning illuminated the stands, and Harry saw something that distracted him completely, the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost, empty row of seats.

Harry's numb hands slipped on the broom handle and his Nimbus dropped a few feet. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he squinted back into the stands. The dog had vanished.

"Harry!" came Wood's anguished yell from the Gryffindor goal posts.
"Harry, behind you!"

Harry looked wildly around. Cedric Diggory was pelting up the field, and a tiny speck of gold was shimmering in the rain-filled air between them
-

With a jolt of panic, Harry threw himself flat to the broomhandle and zoomed toward the Snitch.

"Come on!" he growled at his Nimbus as the rain whipped his face.
'Taster!"

But something odd was happening. An eerie silence was falling across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was forgetting to roar. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Harry had gone suddenly deaf -- what was going on?

And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over him, inside him, just as he became aware of something moving on the field below...

Before he'd had time to think, Harry had taken his eyes off the Snitch and looked down.

At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again.... Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head... a woman...

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now...."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead --"

Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain.... What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her... She was going to die.... She was going to be murdered....

He was falling, falling through the icy mist.

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...."

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.

"Lucky the ground was so soft."

"I thought he was dead for sure."

"But he didn't even break his glasses."

Harry could hear the voices whispering, but they made no sense whatsoever. He didn't have a clue where he was, or how he'd got there, or what he'd been doing before he got there. All he knew was that every inch of him was aching as though it had been beaten.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Scariest... the scariest thing... hooded black figures... cold ... screaming...

Harry's eyes snapped open. He was lying in the hospital wing. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, spattered with mud from head to foot, was

gathered around his bed. Ron and Hermione were also there, looking as though they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"Harry!" said Fred, who looked extremely white underneath, the mud.
"How're you feeling?"

It was as though Harry's memory was on fast forward. The lightning -- the Grim -- the Snitch -- and the dementors...

"What happened?" he said, sitting up so suddenly they all gasped.

"You fell off," said Fred. "Must've been -- what -- fifty feet?"

"We thought you'd died," said Alicia, who was shaking.

Hermione made a small, squeaky noise. Her eyes were extremely bloodshot.

"But the match," said Harry. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?"

No one said anything. The horrible truth sank into Harry like a stone.

"We didn't -- lose?"

"Diggory got the Snitch," said George. "Just after you fell. He didn't realize what had happened. When he looked back and saw you on the ground, he tried to call it off. Wanted a rematch. But they won fair and square... even Wood admits it."

"Where is Wood?" said Harry, suddenly realizing he wasn't there.

"Still in the showers," said Fred. "We think he's trying to drown himself."

Harry put his face to his knees, his hands gripping his hair. Fred grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly.

"C'mon, Harry, you've never missed the Snitch before."

"There had to be one time you didn't get it," said George.

"It's not over yet," said Fred. "We lost by a hundred points"

"Right? So if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw and Slytherin --."

"Hufflepuff'll have to lose by at least two hundred points," said George.

"But if they beat Ravenclaw..."

"No Way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff..."

"It all depends on the points -- a margin of a hundred either way."

Harry lay there, not saying a word. They had lost... for the first time ever, he had lost a Quidditch match.

After ten minutes or so, Madam Pomfrey came over to tell the team to leave him in peace.

"We'll come and see you later," Fred told him. "Don't beat yourself up, Harry, you're still the best Seeker we've ever had."

The team trooped out, trailing mud behind them. Madam Pomfrey shut the door behind them, looking disapproving. Ron and Hermione moved nearer to Harry's bed.

"Dumbledore was really angry," Hermione said in a quaking voice. "I've never seen him like that before. He ran onto the field as You fell, waved his wand, and you sort of slowed down before you hit the ground. Then he whirled his wand at the dementors. Shot silver stuff at them. They left the stadium right away... He was furious they'd come onto the grounds. We heard him --"

"Then he magicked you onto a stretcher," said Ron. "And walked up to school with you floating on it. Everyone thought you were --"

His voice faded, but Harry hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the dementors had done to him... about the screaming voice. He looked up

and saw Ron and Hermione looking at him so anxiously that he quickly cast around for something matter-of-fact to say.

"Did someone get my Nimbus?"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at each other.

"Er --"

"What?" said Harry, looking from one to the other.

"Well... when you fell off, it got blown away," said Hermione hesitantly.

"And?"

"And it hit -- it hit -- oh, Harry -- it hit the Whomping Willow."

Harry's insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very violent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

"And?" he said, dreading the answer.

"Well, you know the Whomping Willow," said Ron. "It -- it doesn't like being hit."

"Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around," said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed, the only remains of Harry's faithful, finally beaten broomstick.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping Harry in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. He didn't argue or complain, but he wouldn't let her throw away the shattered remnants of his Nimbus Two Thousand. He

knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but Harry couldn't help it; he felt as though he'd lost one of his best friends.

He had a stream of visitors, all intent on cheering him up. Hagrid sent him a bunch of earwiggy flowers that looked like yellow cabbages, and Ginny Weasley, blushing furiously, turned up with a get-well card she had made herself, which sang shrilly unless Harry kept it shut under his bowl of fruit. The Gryffindor team visited again on Sunday morning, this time accompanied by Wood, who told Harry (in a hollow, dead sort of voice) that he didn't blame

him in the slightest. Ron and Hermione left Harry's bedside only at night- But nothing anyone said or did could make Harry feel any better, because they knew only half of what was troubling him.

He hadn't told anyone about the Grim, not even Ron -and Hermione, because he knew Ron would panic and Hermione would scoff. The fact remained, however, that it had now appeared twice, and both appearances had been followed by near-fatal accidents; the first time, he had nearly been run over by the Knight Bus; the second, fallen fifty feet from his broomstick. Was the Grim going to haunt him until he actually died? Was he going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for the beast?

And then there were the dementors. Harry felt sick and humiliated every time he thought of them. Everyone said the dementors were horrible, but no one else collapsed every time they went near one. No one else heard echoes in their head of their dying parents.

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling. When the dementors approached him, he heard the last moments of his mother's life, her attempts to protect him, Harry, from Lord Voldemort, and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her.... Harry dozed fitfully, sinking into dreams full of clammy, rotted hands and petrified pleading, jerking awake to dwell again on his

mother's voice.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where he was forced to think about other things, even if he had to endure Draco Malfoy's taunting. Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor's defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated having the full use of both arms again by doing spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom. Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing dementor imitations across the dungeon; Ron finally cracked and flung a large, slippery crocodile heart at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

"If Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," said Ron as they headed toward Lupin's classroom after lunch. "Check who's in there, Hermione."

Hermione peered around the classroom door.

"It's okay!"

Professor Lupin was back at work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes; nevertheless, he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape's behavior while Lupin had been ill.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind he wouldn't listen --"

"-- two rolls of parchment!"

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

"Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Oh no," said Hermione, looking very disappointed. "I've already finished it!"

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a hinkypunk, a little one-legged creature who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless looking.

"Lures travelers into bogs," said Professor Lupin as they took notes. "You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead -people follow the light -- then --"

The hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry among them, but --

"Wait a moment, Harry," Lupin called. "I'd like a word."

Harry doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the hinkypunk's box with a cloth.

"I heard about the match," said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, "and I'm sorry about your broomstick. Is there any chance of fixing it?"

"No," said Harry. "The tree smashed it to bits."

Lupin sighed.

"They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance."

"Did you hear about the dementors too?" said Harry with difficulty.

Lupin looked at him quickly.

"Yes, I did. I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time -- furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds.... I suppose they were the reason you fell?"

"Yes," said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself." Why? Why do they affect me like that? Am I just --?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry's mind. "The dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don't have."

A ray of wintery sunlight fell across the classroom, illuminating Lupin's gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

"Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself... soul-less and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of."

"When they get near me --" Harry stared at Lupin's desk, his throat tight. "I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry's shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment's Silence, then

--

"Why did they have to come to the match?" said Harry bitterly.

"They're getting hungry," said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. "Dumbledore won't let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up.... I don't think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement ... emotions running high... it was their idea of a feast."

"Azkaban must be terrible," Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

"The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheery thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."

"But Sirius Black escaped from them," Harry said slowly. "He got away..."

Lupin's briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

"Yes," he said, straightening up, "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible.... Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long...."

"You made that dementor on the train back off," said Harry suddenly.

"There are -- certain defenses one can use," said Lupin. "But there was only one dementor on the train. The more there are, the more difficult it becomes to resist."

"What defenses?" said Harry at once. "Can you teach me?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert at fighting dementors, Harry, quite the contrary..."

"But if the dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them --"

Lupin looked into Harry's determined face, hesitated, then said, "Well... all right. I'll try and help. But it'll have to wait until next

term, I'm afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

What with the promise of anti-dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's death again, and the fact that Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff in their Quidditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Gryffindor were not out of the running after all, although they could not afford to lose another match. Wood became repossessed of his manic energy, and worked his team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain that persisted into December. Harry saw no hint of a dementor within the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Ron and Hermione had decided to remain at Hogwarts, and though Ron said it was because he couldn't stand two weeks with Percy, and Hermione insisted she needed to use the library, Harry wasn't fooled; they were doing it to keep him company, and he was very grateful.

To everyone's delight except Harry's, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

"We can do all our Christmas shopping there!" said Hermione. "Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Stringmints from Honeydukes!"

Resigned to the fact that he would be the only third year staying behind again, Harry borrowed a copy of *Which Broomstick* from Wood, and decided to spend the day reading up on the different makes. He had been riding one of the school brooms at team practice, an ancient Shooting Star, which was very slow and jerky; he definitely needed a new broom of his own.

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid good-bye to Ron

and Hermione, who were wrapped in cloaks and scarves, then turned up the marble staircase alone, and headed back toward Gryffindor Tower. Snow had started to fall outside the windows, and the castle was very still and quiet.

"Psst -- Harry!"

He turned, halfway along the third-floor corridor, to see Fred and George peering out at him from behind a statue of a humpbacked, one-eyed witch.

"What are you doing?" said Harry curiously. "How come you're not going to Hogsmeade?"

"We've come to give you a bit of festive cheer before we go," said Fred, with a mysterious wink. "Come in here...."

He nodded toward an empty classroom to the left of the one-eyed statue. Harry followed Fred and George inside. George closed the door quietly and then turned, beaming, to look at Harry.

"Early Christmas present for you, Harry," he said.

Fred pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very worn piece of parchment with nothing written on it. Harry, suspecting one of Fred and George's jokes, stared at it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"This, Harry, is the secret of our success," said George, patting the parchment fondly.

"It's a wrench, giving it to you," said Fred, "but we decided last night, your need's greater than ours."

"Anyway, we know it by heart," said George. "We bequeath it to you. We don't really need it anymore."

"And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?" said Harry.

"A bit of old parchment!" said Fred, closing his eyes with a grimace as though Harry had mortally offended him. "Explain, George."

"Well... when we were in our first year, Harry -- young, carefree, and innocent --"

Harry snorted. He doubted whether Fred and George had ever been innocent.

"Well, more innocent than we are now -- we got into a spot of bother with Filch."

"We let off a Dungbomb in the corridor and it upset him for some reason --"

"So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual --" detention disembowelment and we couldn't help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked Confiscated and Highly Dangerous.

"Don't tell me --" said Harry, starting to grin.

"Well, what would you've done?" said Fred. "George caused a diversion by dropping another Dungbomb, I whipped the drawer open, and grabbed -- this."

"It's not as bad as it sounds, you know," said George. "We don't reckon Filch ever found out how to work it. He probably suspected what it was, though, or he wouldn't have confiscated it."

"And you know how to work it?"

"Oh yes," said Fred, smirking. "This little beauty's taught us more than all the teachers in this school."

"You're winding me up," said Harry, looking at the ragged old bit of parchment.

"Oh, are we?" said George.

He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They joined each other, they crisscrossed, they fanned into every corner of the parchment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that proclaimed:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present THE MARAUDER'S MAP

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labeled with a name in minuscule writing. Astounded, Harry bent over it. A labeled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was pacing his study; the caretaker's cat, Mrs. Norris, was prowling the second floor; and Peeves the Poltergeist was currently bouncing around the trophy room. And as Harry's eyes traveled up and down the familiar corridors, he noticed something else.

This map showed a set of passages he had never entered. And many of them seemed to lead -

"Right into Hogsmeade," said Fred, tracing one of them with his finger. "There are seven in all. Now, Filch knows about these four" -- he pointed them out -- "but we're sure we're the only ones who know about these. Don't bother with the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We used it until last winter, but it's caved in -- completely blocked. And we don't reckon anyone's ever used this one, because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance. But this one here, this one leads right into the cellar of Honeydukes. We've used it loads of times. And as you might've noticed, the entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crone's hump."

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," sighed George, patting the heading of the map. "We owe them so much."

"Noble men, working tirelessly to help a new generation of lawbreakers," said Fred solemnly.

"Right," said George briskly. "Don't forget to wipe it after you've used it or anyone can read it," Fred said warningly.

"Just tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed!' And it'll go blank."

"So, young Harry," said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy, "mind you behave yourself."

"See you in Honeydukes," said George, winking.

They left the room, both smirking in a satisfied sort of way.

Harry stood there, gazing at the miraculous map. He watched the tiny ink Mrs. Norris turn left and pause to sniff at something on the floor. If Filch really didn't know... he wouldn't have to pass the dementors at all....

But even as he stood there, flooded with excitement, something Harry had once heard Mr. Weasley say came floating out of his memory.

Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can't see where it keeps its brain.

This map was one of those dangerous magical objects Mr. Weasley had been warning against.... Aids for Magical Mischief Makers... but then, Harry reasoned, he only wanted to use it to get into Hogsmeade, it wasn't as though he wanted to steal anything or attack anyone... and Fred and George had been using it for years without anything horrible happening....

Harry traced the secret passage to Honeydukes with his finger.

Then, quite suddenly, as though following orders, he rolled up the map, stuffed it inside his robes, and hurried to the door of the classroom. He opened it a couple of inches. There was no one outside. Very carefully, he edged out of the room and behind the statue of the

one-eyed witch.

What did he have to do? He pulled out the map again and saw to his astonishment, that a new ink figure had appeared upon it, labeled Harry Potter. This figure was standing exactly where the real Harry was standing, about halfway down the third-floor corridor.

Harry watched carefully. His little Ink self appeared to be tapping the witch with his minute wand. Harry quickly took out his real wand and tapped the statue. Nothing happened. He looked back at the map. The tiniest speech bubble had appeared next to his figure. The word inside said, "Dissendium."

"Dissendium!" Harry whispered, tapping the stone witch again.

At once, the statue's hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. Harry glanced quickly up and down the corridor, then tucked the map away again, hoisted himself into the hole headfirst, and pushed himself forward.

He slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, then landed on cold, damp earth. He stood up, looking around. It was

pitch dark. He held up his wand, muttered, "Lumos! " and saw that he was in a very narrow, low, earthy passageway. He raised the map, tapped it with the tip of his wand, and muttered, "Mischief managed!" The map went blank at once. He folded it carefully, tucked it inside his robes, then, heart beating fast, both excited and apprehensive, he set off.

The passage twisted and turned, more like the burrow of a giant rabbit than anything else. Harry hurried along it, stumbling now and then on the uneven floor, holding his wand out in front of him.

It took ages, but Harry had the thought of Honeydukes to sustain him. After what felt like an hour, the passage began to rise. Panting, Harry sped up, his face hot, his feet very cold.

Ten minutes later, he came to the foot of some worn stone steps, which rose out of sight above him. Careful not to make any noise, Harry began to climb. A hundred steps, two hundred steps, he lost count as he

climbed, watching his feet.... Then, without warning, his head hit something hard.

It seemed to be a trapdoor. Harry stood there, massaging the top of his head, listening. He couldn't hear any sounds above him. Very slowly, he pushed the trapdoor open and peered over the edge.

He was in a cellar, which was full of wooden crates and boxes. Harry climbed out of the trapdoor and replaced it -- it blended so perfectly with the dusty floor that it was impossible to tell it was there. Harry crept slowly toward the wooden staircase that led upstairs. Now he could definitely hear voices, not to mention the tinkle of a bell and the opening and shutting of a door.

Wondering what he ought to do, he suddenly heard a door open much closer at hand; somebody was about to come downstairs.

"And get another box of Jelly Slugs, dear, they've nearly cleaned us out --" said a woman's voice.

A pair of feet was coming down the staircase. Harry leapt behind an enormous crate and waited for the footsteps to pass. He heard the man shifting boxes against the opposite wall. He might not get another chance --

Quickly and silently, Harry dodged out from his hiding place and climbed the stairs; looking back, he saw an enormous backside and shiny bald head, buried in a box. Harry reached the door at the top of the stairs, slipped through it, and found himself behind the counter of Honeydukes -- he ducked, crept sideways, and then straightened up.

Honeydukes was so crowded with Hogwarts students that no one looked twice at Harry. He edged among them, looking around, and suppressed a laugh as he imagined the look that would spread over Dudley's piggy face if he could see where Harry was now.

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat, honey-colored toffees; hundreds of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans,

and another of Fizzing Whizbees, the levitating sherbert balls that Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were "Special Effects" -- sweets: Droobles Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps ("breathe fire for your friends!"), Ice Mice ("hear your teeth chatter and squeak!"), peppermint creams shaped like toads ("hop realistically in the stomach!"), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.

Harry squeezed himself through a crowd of sixth years and saw a sign hanging in the farthest corner of the shop (UNUSUAL TASTES). Ron and Hermione were standing underneath it, examining a tray of blood-flavored lollipops. Harry sneaked up behind them.

"Ugh, no, Harry won't want one of those, they're for vampires, I expect," Hermione was saying.

"How about these?" said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clusters under Hermione's nose.

"Definitely not," said Harry.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione. "What are you doing here? How -- how did you --?"

"Wow!" said Ron, looking very impressed, "you've learned to Apparate!"

"Course I haven't," said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all about the Marauder's Map.

"How come Fred and George never gave it to me!" said Ron, outraged. "I'm their brother!"

"But Harry isn't going to keep it!" said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. "He's going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren't you, Harry?"

"No, I'm not!" said Harry.

"Are you mad?" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "Hand in something that good?"

"If I hand it in, I'll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it!"

"But what about Sirius Black?" Hermione hissed. "He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the castle! The teachers have got to know!"

"He can't be getting in through a passage," said Harry quickly. "There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George reckon Filch already knows about four of them. And of the other three -- one of them's caved in, so no one can get through it. one of them's got the Whomping Willow planted over the entrance, so you can't get out of it. And the one I just came through -well - - it's really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar, so unless he knew it was there..."

Harry hesitated. What if Black did know the passage was there?

Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to a notice pasted on the inside of the sweetshop door.

-----BY ORDER OF ----- THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Customers are reminded that until further notice, dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night after sundown. This measure has been put in place for the safety of Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is therefore advisable that you complete your shopping well before nightfall.

Merry Christmas!

"See?" said Ron quietly. "I'd like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with dementors swarming all over the village. Anyway, Hermione, the Honeydukes owners would hear a break-in, wouldn't they? They live over the shop!"

"Yes, but but --" Hermione seemed to be struggling to find another problem. "Look, Harry still shouldn't be coming into Hogsmeade. He hasn't got a signed form! If anyone finds out, he'll be in so much trouble! And it's not nightfall yet -- what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?"

"He'd have a job spotting Harry in this," said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. "Come on, Hermione, it's Christmas. Harry deserves a break."

Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

"Are you going to report me?" Harry asked her, grinning.

"Oh -- of course not -- but honestly, Harry --"

"Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?" said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. "And the Jelly Slugs? And the Acid Pops? Fred gave me one of those when I was seven -- it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick." Ron stared broodingly into the Acid Pop box. "Reckon Fred'd take a bit of Cockroach Cluster if I told him they were peanuts?"

When Ron and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the three of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees.

Harry shivered; unlike the other two, he didn't have his cloak. They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind, Ron and Hermione shouting through their scarves.

"That's the post office

"Zonko's is up there --"

"We could go up to the Shrieking Shack

"Tell you what," said Ron, his teeth chattering, "shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing, so they crossed the road, and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlock' up at the bar.

"That's Madam Rosmerta," said Ron. "I'll get the drinks, shall I?" he added, going slightly red.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the back of the room, „her, there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree, which stood next to the fireplace. Ron came back five minutes later, carrying three foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

"Merry Christmas!" he said happily, raising his tankard.

Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled his hair. The door of the Three Broomsticks had opened again. Harry looked over the rim of his tankard and choked.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, who was deep in conversation with a portly man in a lime-green bowler hat and a pinstriped cloak -- Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron and Hermione had both placed hands on the top of Harry's head and forced him off his stool and under the table. Dripping with butterbeer and crouching out of sight, Harry clutched his empty tankard and watched the teachers' and Fudge's feet move toward the bar, pause, then turn and walk right toward him.

Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, *Mobiliarbus!*"

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. Staring through the dense lower branches, Harry saw four sets of chair legs move back from the table right beside theirs, then heard the grunts and sighs of the teachers and minister as they sat down.

Next he saw another pair of feet, wearing sparkly turquoise high heels, and heard a woman's voice. "A small gillywater --"

"Mine," said Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Four pints of mulled mead --"

"Ta, Rosmerta," said Hagrid.

"A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella --"

"Mmm!" said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

"So you'll be the red currant rum, Minister."

"Thank you, Rosmerta, m'dear," said Fudge's voice. "Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won't you? Come and join us...."

"Well, thank you very much, Minister."

Harry watched the glittering heels march away and back again. His heart was pounding uncomfortably in his throat. Why hadn't it occurred to him that this was the last weekend of term for the teachers to& And how long were they going to sit there? He needed time to sneak back into Honeydukes if he wanted to return to school tonight.... Hermione's leg gave a nervous twitch next to him.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?" came Madam Rosmerta's voice.

Harry saw the lower part of Fudge's thick body twist in his chair as though he were checking for eavesdroppers. Then he said in a quiet voice, "What else, m'dear, but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what

happened up at the school at Halloween?"

I did hear a rumor," admitted Madam Rosmerta.

"Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?" said Professor McGonagall exasperatedly.

"Do you think Blacks still in the area, Minister?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"I'm sure of it," said Fudge shortly.

"You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?" said Madam Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away... It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, dear, I don't like them any more than you do," said Fudge uncomfortably. "Necessary precaution... unfortunate, but there YOU are.... I've just met some of them. They're in a fury against Dumbledore -- he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

"I should think not," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?"

"Hear, hear!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, whose feet were dangling a foot from the ground.

"All the same," demurred Fudge, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse.... We all know what Black's capable of..."

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought... I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity, "Worse

than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"I ca'A believe that. What could possibly be worse?" "You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," murmured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his-best friend was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here -- ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

"Precisely," said Professor McGonagall. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course -- exceptionally bright, in fact -- but I don't think we've ever had such a pair of troublemakers --"

"I dunno," chuckled Hagrid. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run fer their money."

"You'd have thought Black and Potter were brothers!" chimed in Professor Flitwick. "Inseparable!"

"Of course they were," said Fudge. "Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

"Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Worse even than that, rn'dear...." Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. "Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an

easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

"How does that work?" said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

"An immensely complex spell," he said squeakily, "involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find -- unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!"

"So Black was the Potters' Secret-Keeper?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself... and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper himself."

"He suspected Black?" gasped Madam Rosmerta.

"He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements," said Professor McGonagall darkly. "Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who."

"But James Potter insisted on using Black?"

"He did," said Fudge heavily. "And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed --" "Black betrayed them?" breathed Madam Rosmerta.

"He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters' death. But, as we all know,

You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it --"

"Filthy, stinkin' turncoat!" Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

"Shh!" said Professor McGonagall.

"I met him!" growled Hagrid. "I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued Harry from Lily an' James's house after they was killed! jus' got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an' his parents dead... an' Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin' motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin' there. I didn' know he'd bin Lily an' James's Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd jus' heard the news o' You-Know-Who's attack an' come ter see what he could do. White an' shakin', he was. An' yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!" Hagrid roared.

"Hagrid, please!" said Professor McGonagall. "Keep your voice down!"

"How was I ter know he wasn' upset abou' Lily an' James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou'! An' then he says, 'Give Harry ter me, Hagrid, I'm his godfather, I'll look after him --' Ha! But I'd had me orders from Dumbledore, an' I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter his aunt an' uncle's. Black argued, but in the end he gave in. Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry there. 'I won't need it anymore,' he says.

"I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Why wouldn' he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. Dumbledore knew he'd bin the Potters' Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin' ter have ter run fer it that night, knew it was a matter o' hours before the Ministry was after him.

"But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh? I bet he'd 've pitched him off

the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to em anymore...."

A long silence followed Hagrid's story. Then Madam Rosmerta said with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him next day!"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly. "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew -- another of the Potters' friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew... that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" said Madam Rosmerta.

"Hero-worshipped Black and Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather ,harp with him. You can imagine how I -how I regret that now..." She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

"There, now, Minerva," said Fudge kindly, "Pettigrew died a hero's death. Eyewitnesses -- Muggles, of course, we wiped their, memories later -- told us how Pettigrew cornered Black. They say he was sobbing, 'Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?' And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens..."

Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, "Stupid boy ... foolish boy... he was always hopeless at dueling... should have left it to the Ministry...."

"I tell yeh, if I'd got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn't 've messed around with wands -- I'd 've ripped him limb -- from -- limb," Hagrid growled.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hagrid," said Fudge sharply. "Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those

people. I -- I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the sewer below. Bodies everywhere. Muggles screaming. And Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him... a heap of bloodstained robes and a few -- a few fragments --"

Fudge's voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

"Well, there you have it, Rosmerta," said Fudge thickly. "Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement 'Squad and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Black's been in Azkaban ever since."

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

"Is it true he's mad, Minister?"

"I wish I could say that he was," said Fudge slowly. "I certainly believe his master's defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered and desperate man -- cruel... pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban. You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there's no sense in them... but I was shocked at how normal Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. It was unnerving. You'd have thought he was merely bored -- asked if I'd finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the dementors seemed to be having on him -- and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?"

"I daresay that is his -- er -- eventual plan," said Fudge evasively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing... but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again...."

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the headmaster, he'd better head back up to the castle," said Professor McGonagall.

One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Harry took the weight of their owners once more; hems of cloaks swung into sight, and Madam Rosemerta's glittering heels disappeared behind the bar. The door of the Three Broomsticks opened again, there was another flurry of snow, and the teachers had disappeared.

"Harry?"

Ron's and Hermione's faces appeared under the table. They were both staring at him, lost for words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIREBOLT

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tunnel, and into the castle once more. All he knew was that the return trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding with the conversation he had just heard.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge... why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Harry's parents had died because their best friend had betrayed them?

Ron and Herinione watched Harry nervously all through dintier, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end- of-term high spirits. Harry, who didn't want Fred and George asking him whether he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet. He pushed his books aside and quickly found what he was looking for -- the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was

full of wizard pictures of his mother and father. He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until...

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there ... that must be him. Their best man... Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realize he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear my Min screaming if they get too close -

Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened, My Lord...

the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper and then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the dementors drew near....

"Harry, you -- you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

"Where is everyone?" said Harry.

"Gone! It's the first day of the holidays, remember?" said Ron, watching Harry closely. "It's nearly lunchtime; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute."

Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out in front of the fire like a large, ginger rug.

"You really don't look well, you know," Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

"I'm fine," said Harry.

"Harry, listen," said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn't go doing anything stupid."

"Like what?" said Harry.

"Like trying to go after Black," said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn't say anything.

"You won't, will you, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Because Black's not worth dying for," said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn't seem to understand at all.

"D'you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me?" Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking apprehensive. "I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort. And if you'd heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget it in a hurry. And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of hers betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her --"

"There's nothing you can do!" said Hermione, looking stricken. "The dementors will catch Black and he'll go back to Azkaban and -- and serve him right!"

"You heard what Fudge said. Black isn't affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It's not a punishment for him like it is for the others."

"So what are you saying?" said Ron, looking very tense. "You want to -- to kill Black or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Herinione in a panicky voice. "Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?"

Again, Harry didn't answer. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, while Black was at liberty, was almost more than he could stand.

Malfoy knows," he said abruptly. "Remember what he said to me in Potions? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself... I'd want revenge.

"You're going to take Malfoy's advice instead of ours?" said Ron furiously. "Listen... you know what Pettigrew's mother got back after Black had finished with him? Dad told me -- the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew's finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black's a madman, Harry, and he's dangerous --"

"Malfoy's dad must have told him," said Harry, ignoring Ron. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle --"

"Say You-Know-Who, will you?" interjected Ron angrily.

-- so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort --"

-- and Malfoy'd love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy's just hoping you'll get Yourself killed before he has to play you at Quidditch."

"Harry, please," said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, "Please be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but d-don't Put Yourself in danger, it's what Black wants.... Oh, Harry, you'd be Playing right into Black's hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn't want you to get hurt, would they? They'd never want you to go looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's -- let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him for ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron --"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess, he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set --"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the

portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!"), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hems of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen -- is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Ron nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there.

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

"Y'Ve heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry's neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

"Hagrid, what is it?" said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

"What's this, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

"Well, that's okay then, Hagrid!" said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee's offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated. Yours in fellowship...

There followed a list of the school governors.

"Oh," said Ron. "But you said Buckbeak isn't a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he'll get off."

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "They've got it in fer interestin' creatures!"

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid's cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

"I couldn' leave him tied up out there in the snow!" choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called "interesting creatures" and other people called "terrifying monsters." Or' the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was positively cute.

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's massive forearm. "I'm sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe."

"Won't make no difference!" sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him! Ad if I lose the case, Buckbeak --"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them dementors outta the castle, an' Sirius Black lurkin' around --"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black. But Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, not now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, You just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses --"

"I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the hippogriff got off I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened."

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

"Er -- shall I make a cup of tea?" said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

"It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset," Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, "Yer right. I can' afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together....."

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes --"

"We do like them!" lied Hermione at once.

"Yeah, they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. "Er -- how are the flobberworms?"

"Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce."

"Oh no!" said Ron, his lip twitching.

"An' them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. "Gotta walk past 'em ev'ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. 'S like bein' back in Azkaban --"

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?"

"Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid quietly. "Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin' mad. Kep' goin' over horrible stuff in me mind... the day I got expelled from Hogwarts... day me dad died... day I had ter let Norbert go...."

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

"Yeh can' really remember who yeh are after a while. An' yeh can' really see the point o' livin' at all. I used ter hope I'd jus' die in me sleep. When they let me out, it was like bein' born again, ev'rythin' I came floodin' back, it was the bes' feelin' in the world. Mind, the dementors weren't keen on lettin' me go."

"But you were innocent!" said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

"Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, so they can leech all the happiness out of 'em, they don' give a damn who's guilty an' who's not."

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, "Thought o' jus' lettin' Buckbeak go... tryin' ter make him fly away... but how d'yeh explain ter a hippogriff it's gotta go inter hidin'? An' -an' I'm scared o' breakin' the law...." He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. "I don' ever want ter go back ter Azkaban."

The trip to Hagrid's, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn't brood constantly on revenge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

"Here's something... there was a case in 1722... but the hippogriff was convicted -- ugh, look what they did to it, that's disgusting --"

"This might help, look -- a manticores savaged someone in 1296, and they let the manticores off -- oh -- no, that was only because everyone was

too scared to go near it."

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron's pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

"Oy! Presents!"

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a small heap of parcels had appeared. Ron was already ripping the paper off his own presents.

'Another sweater from Mum... maroon again... see if you've got one.

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front, also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying underneath.

"What's that?" said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of maroon socks in his hand.

"Dunno..."

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron dropped his socks and jumped off his bed for a closer look.

"I don't believe it," he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glittered as he picked it up. He

could feel it vibrating and let go; it hung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

"Who sent it to you?" said Ron in a hushed voice.

"Look and see if there's a card," said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt's wrappings.

"Nothing! Blimey, who'd spend that much on you?"

"Well," said Harry, feeling stunned, "I'm betting it wasn't the Dursleys."

"I bet it was Dumbledore," said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. "He sent you the Invisibility Cloak anonymously...."

"That was my dad's, though," said Harry. "Dumbledore was just Passing it on to me. He wouldn't spend hundreds of Galleons on me. He can't go giving students stuff like this --"

"That's why he wouldn't say it was from him!" said Ron. "In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry" -- Ron gave a great whoop of laughter -- "Malfoy! Wait till he sees you on this! He'll be sick as a pig! This is an international standard broom, this is!"

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry's bed, laughing his head off at the thought of Malfoy. "Who -?"

"I know," said Ron, controlling himself, "I know who it could've been -- Lupin!"

"What?" said Harry, now starting to laugh himself "Lupin? Listen, if he had this much gold, he'd be able to buy himself some new robes."

"Yeah, but he likes you," said Ron. "And he was away when your Nimbus

got smashed, and he might've heard about it and decided to visit Diagon Alley and get this for you --"

"What d'you mean, he was away?" said Harry. "He was ill when I was playing in that match."

"Well, he wasn't in the hospital wing," said Ron. "I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, remember?"

Harry frowned at Ron.

"I can't see Lupin affording something like this."

"What're you two laughing about?"

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and carrying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, with a string of tinsel tied around his neck.

"Don't bring him in here!" said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket.

But Hermione wasn't listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus's empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

"Oh, Harry! Who sent you that?"

"No idea," said Harry. "There wasn't a card or anything with it."

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell, and she bit her lip.

"What's the matter with you?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Hermione slowly, "but it's a bit odd, isn't it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn't it?"

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

"It's the best broom there is, Hermione," he said.

"So it must've been really expensive...."

"Probably cost more than all the Slytherins' brooms put together," said Ron happily.

"Well... who'd send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they'd sent it?" said Hermione.

"Who cares?" said Ron impatiently. "Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?"

"I don't think anyone should ride that broom just yet!" said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

"What d'you think Harry's going to do with it -- sweep the floor?" said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus's bed, right at Ron's chest.

"GET -- HIM -- OUT -- OF -- HERE!" Ron bellowed as Crookshanks's claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry's bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks's fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tint,, whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had become dislodged from Uncle Vernon's old socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

"I forgot about that!" Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. "I never wear those socks if I can help it...."

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

"You'd better take that cat out of here, Hermione," said Ron furiously, sitting on Harry's bed nursing his toe. "Can't you shut that thing up?" he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks's yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now were Ron's stifled moans of pain and rage. Scabbers was huddled in Ron's hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron's pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to see that Scabbers, once so fat, was now very skinny; patches of fur seemed to have fallen out too

"He's not looking too good, is he?" Harry said.

"It's stress!" said Ron. "He'd be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!"

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, couldn't help feeling that unless Scabbers had powers he had never revealed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron's frequent complaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, he was sure Ron would be very miserable if Scabbers died.

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh attempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted himself to examining the Firebolt, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn't say anything, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy- looking tailcoat. There were only three other

students, two extremely nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced Slytherin fifth year.

"Merry Christmas!" said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the table. "As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables.... Sit down, sit down!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

"Crackers!" said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch's hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron's eye and they both grinned; Snape's mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard's hat at once.

"Dig in!" he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

"Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!" said Dumbledore, standing up.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness...."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair --"

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her

enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!"

"We'll risk it, Sibyll," said Professor McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

"Tripe, Sibyll?"

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor Lupin?"

"I'm afraid the poor fellow is ill again," said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. "Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day."

"But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva, she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him --"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney's conversation, "that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape. "W -- what?" said Harry, scrambling to his feet. "Why?"

"It will need to be checked for jinxes," said Professor McGonagall. "Of course, I'm no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down --"

"Strip it down?" repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

"It shouldn't take more than a few weeks," said Professor McGonagall. "You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free."

"There's nothing wrong with it!" said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. "Honestly, Professor --"

"You can't know that, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, "not until you've flown it, at any rate, and I'm afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed."

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood staring after her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

"What did you go running to McGonagall for?"

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

"Because I thought -- and Professor McGonagall agrees with me -- that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PATRONUS

Harry knew that Hermione had meant well, but that didn't stop him from being angry with her. He had been the owner of the best broom in the world for a few short hours, and now, because of her interference, he didn't know whether he would ever see it again. He was positive that there was nothing wrong with the Firebolt now, but what sort of state would it be in once it had been subjected to all sorts of anti-jinx tests?

Ron was furious with Hermione too. As far as he was concerned, the stripping-down of a brand- new Firebolt was nothing less than criminal damage. Hermione, who remained convinced that she had acted for the best, started avoiding the common room. Harry and Ron supposed she had taken refuge in the library and didn't try to persuade her to come back. All in all, they were glad when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year, and Gryffindor Tower became crowded and noisy again. Wood sought Harry out on the night before term started.

"Had a good Christmas?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, he sat down, lowered his voice, and said, "I've been, doing some thinking over Christmas, Harry. After last match, you know. If the dementors come to the next one... I mean... we can't afford you to -- well --"

Wood broke off, looking awkward.

"I'm working on it," said Harry quickly. "Professor Lupin said he'd train me to ward off the dementors. We should be starting this week. He said he'd have time after Christmas."

"Ah," said Wood, his expression clearing. "Well, in that case -- I really didn't want to lose you as Seeker, Harry. And have you ordered a new broom yet?"

"No," said Harry.

"What! You'd better get a move on, you know -- you can't ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!"

"He got a Firebolt for Christmas," said Ron.

"A Firebolt? No! Seriously? A -- a real Firebolt?"

"Don't get excited, Oliver," said Harry gloomily. "I haven't got it anymore. It was confiscated." And he explained all about how the Firebolt was now being checked for jinxes.

"Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?"

"Sirius Black" Harry said wearily. "He's supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it."

Waving aside the information that a famous murderer was after his Seeker, Wood said, "But Black couldn't have bought a Firebolt! He's on the run! The whole country's on the lookout for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?"

"I know," said Harry, "but McGonagall still wants to strip it down --"

Wood went pale.

"I'll go and talk to her, Harry," he promised. "I'll make her see reason.... A Firebolt... a real Firebolt, on our team... She wants Gryffindor to win as much as we do.... I'll make her see sense. A Firebolt..."

Classes started again the next day. The last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a raw January morning, but Hagrid had provided a bonfire full of salamanders for their enjoyment, and they spent an unusually good lesson collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire blazing while the flame-loving lizards scampered up and down the crumbling, white-hot logs. The first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Professor Trelawney was now teaching them palmistry, and she lost no time in informing Harry that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

It was Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry was keen to get to; after his conversation with Wood, he wanted to get started on his anti-dementor lessons as soon as possible.

"Ah yes," said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise at the end of class. "Let me see... how about eight o'clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough.... I'll have to think carefully about how we're going to do this.... We can't bring a real dementor into the castle to practice on...."

"Still looks ill, doesn't he?" said Ron as they walked down the corridor, heading to dinner. "What d'you reckon's the matter with him?"

There was a loud and impatient "tuh" from behind them. It was Hermione, who had been sitting at the feet of a suit of armor, repacking her bag, which was so full of books it wouldn't close.

"And what are you tutting at us for?" said Ron irritably.

"Nothing," said Hermione in a lofty voice, heaving her bag back over her shoulder.

"Yes, you were," said Ron. "I said I wonder what's wrong with Lupin, and you --"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" said Hermione, with a look of maddening superiority.

"If you don't want to tell us, don't," snapped Ron.

"Fine," said Hermione haughtily, and she marched off.

"She doesn't know," said Ron, staring resentfully after Hermione. "She's just trying to get us to talk to her again."

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, Harry left Gryffindor Tower for the History of Magic classroom. It was dark and empty when he arrived, but he lit the lamps with his wand and had waited only five minutes when Professor Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case, which he heaved onto Professor Binn's desk.

"What's that?" said Harry.

"Another boggart," said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. "I've been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very luckily, I found this one lurking inside Mr. Filch's filing cabinet. It's the nearest we'll get to a real dementor. The boggart will turn into a dementor when he sees you, so we'll be able to practice on him. I can store him in my office when we're not using him; there's a cupboard under my desk he'll like."

"Okay," said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn't apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found such a good substitute for a real dementor.

"So..." Professor Lupin had taken out his own wand, and indicated that Harry should do the same. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry -- well beyond ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm."

"How does it work?" said Harry nervously.

"Well, when it works correctly, It conjures up a Patronus," said Lupin, "which is a kind of anti- dementor -- a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the dementor."

Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagrid-sized figure holding a large club. Professor Lupin continued, "The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the dementor feeds upon -- hope, happiness, the desire to survive -- but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do. Finally, he settled on the moment when he had first ridden a broomstick.

"Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the wonderful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this --" Lupin cleared his throat. "Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto patronum, " Harry repeated under his breath, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh -- yeah --" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride. "Expecto patrono -- no, patronum -- sorry -- expecto patronum, expecto patronum"

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right, then -- ready to try it on a dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his mind on flying, but something else kept intruding.... Any second now, he might hear his mother again... but he shouldn't think that, or he would hear her again, and he didn't want to... or did he?

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled.

A dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak. The lamps around

the classroom flickered and went out. The dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of piercing cold broke over him --

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto --"

But the classroom and the dementor were dissolving.... Harry was failing again through thick white fog, and his mother's voice was louder than ever, echoing inside his head -- "Not Harry! Not Harry! please -- I'll do anything!"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"Harry!"

Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn't have to ask what had happened.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

"Are you all right?" said Lupin.

"Yes..." Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

"Here --" Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before we try again. I didn't expect you to do it your first time; in fact, I would have been astounded if you had."

"It's getting worse," Harry muttered, biting off the Frog's head. "I could hear her louder that time -- and him -- Voldemort

Lupin looked paler than usual. ,

"Harry, if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand --"

"I do!" said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. "I've got to! What if the dementors turn up at our match

against Ravenclaw? I can't afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we've lost the Quidditch Cup!"

"All right then... " said Lupin. "You might want to select 'other memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on.... That one doesn't seem to have been strong enough...."

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Gryffindor had won the House Championship last year had definitely qualified as very happy. He gripped his wand tightly again and took up his position in the middle of the classroom.

"Ready?" said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

"Ready," said Harry; trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Gryffindor winning, and not dark thoughts about what was going to happen when the box opened.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The dementor glided forward, drawing its breath; one rotting hand was extending toward Harry -

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto Pat --"

White fog obscured his senses... big, blurred shapes were moving around him... then came a new voice, a man's voice, shouting, panicking --

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off --"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room -- a door bursting open -- a cackle of high-pitched laughter --

"Harry! Harry... wake up...."

Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a dusty classroom floor.

"I heard my dad," Harry mumbled. "That's the first time I've ever heard him -- he tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it...."

Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face mingling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, wiping them off on his robes, pretending to do up his shoelace, so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah..." Face dry, Harry looked up. "Why -- you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I -- I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry -- perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced.... I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this...."

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is.... Hang on...."

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory... one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus...

The moment when he'd first found out he was a wizard, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that wasn't a happy memory, he didn't know what was.... Concentrating very hard on how he had felt when he'd realized he'd be leaving Privet Drive, Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right -- go!"

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the dementor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark

'EXPECTO PATRONUM!' Harry bellowed. 'EXPECTO PATRONUM!
EXPECTO PATRONUM!
"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again -- except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a badly tuned radio -- softer and louder and softer again -- and he could still see the dementor -- it

had halted -- and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand, to hover between him and the dementor, and though Harry's legs felt like water, he was still on his feet -- though for how much longer, he wasn't sure --

"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the dementor; he sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if he'd just run a mile, and felt his legs shaking. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a silvery orb again.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, striding over to where Harry sat. "Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!"

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?"

"Not now," said Lupin firmly. "You've had enough for one night. Here --"

He handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate.

"Eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week?"

"Okay," said Harry. He took a bite of the chocolate and watched Lupin extinguishing the lamps that had rekindled with the disappearance of the dementor. A thought had just occurred to him.

"Professor Lupin?" he said. "If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

Lupin turned very quickly.

"What gives you that idea?" he said sharply.

"Nothing -- I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too...."

Lupin's face relaxed.

"Yes, I knew him," he said shortly. "Or I thought I did. You'd better be off, Harry, it's getting late."

Harry left the classroom, walking along the corridor and around a corner, then took a detour behind a suit of armor and sank down on its plinth to finish his chocolate, wishing he hadn't mentioned Black, as Lupin was obviously not keen on the subject. Then Harry's thoughts wandered back to his mother and father...

He felt drained and strangely empty, even though he was so full of chocolate. Terrible though it was to hear his parents' last moments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child. But he'd never be able to produce a proper Patronus if he half wanted to hear his parents again....

"They're dead," he told himself sternly. "They're dead and listening to echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup."

He stood up, crammed the last bit of chocolate into his mouth, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term. Slytherin won, though narrowly. According to Wood, this was good news for Gryffindor, who would take second place if they beat Ravenclaw too. He therefore increased the number of team practices to five a leek. This meant that with Lupin's anti-dementor classes, which in themselves were more draining than six Quidditch practices, Harry had just one night a week to do all his homework. Even so, he was showing the strain nearly as much as Hermione, whose immense workload finally seemed to be getting to her. Every night, without fail, Hermione was to be seen in a corner of the common room, several tables spread with books, Arithmancy charts, rune dictionaries, diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects, and file upon file of extensive notes; she barely spoke to anybody and snapped when she was interrupted.

"How's she doing it?" Ron muttered to Harry one evening as Harry sat finishing a nasty essay on Undetectable Poisons for Snape. Harry looked up. Hermione was barely visible behind a tottering pile of books.

"Doing what?"

"Getting to all her classes!" Ron said. "I heard her talking to Professor Vector, that Arithmancy witch, this morning. They were going on about yesterday's lesson, but Hermione can't 've been there, because she was with us in Care of Magical Creatures! And Ernie McMillan told me she's never missed a Muggle Studies class, but half of them are at the same time as Divination, and she's never missed one of them either!"

Harry didn't have time to fathom the mystery of Hermione's impossible schedule at the moment; he really needed to get on with Snape's essay. Two seconds later, however, he was interrupted again, this time by Wood.

"Bad news, Harry. I've just been to see Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt. She -- er -- got a bit shirty with me. Told m' I'd got my priorities wrong. Seemed to think I cared more about winning the Cup than I do about you staying alive. Just because I told her I didn't care if it threw you off, as long as you caught the Snitch first." Wood shook his head in disbelief. "Honestly, the way she was yelling at me... you'd think I'd said something terrible... then I asked her how much longer she was going to keep it. He screwed up his face and imitated Professor McGonagall's severe voice. 'As long as necessary, Wood'... I reckon it's time you ordered a new broom, Harry. There's an order form at the back of Which Broomstick... you could get a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, like Malfoy's got."

"I'm not buying anything Malfoy thinks is good," said Harry flatly.

January faded imperceptibly into February, with no change in the bitterly cold weather. The match against Ravenclaw was drawing nearer and nearer, but Harry still hadn't ordered a new broom. He was now asking Professor McGonagall for news of the Firebolt after every Transfiguration lesson, Ron standing hopefully at his shoulder, Hermione rushing past with her face averted.

"No, Potter, you can't have it back yet," Professor McGonagall told him the twelfth time this happened, before he'd even opened his mouth. "We've checked for most of the usual curses, but Professor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall tell you

once we've finished checking it. Now, please stop badgering me."

To make matters even worse, Harry's anti-dementor lessons were not going nearly as well as he had hoped. Several sessions on, he was able to produce an indistinct, silvery shadow every time the boggart-dementor approached him, but his Patronus was too feeble to drive the dementor away. All it did was hover, like a semitransparent cloud, draining Harry of energy as he fought to keep it there. Harry felt angry with himself, guilty about his secret desire to hear his parents' voices again.

"You're expecting too much of yourself," said Professor Lupin, sternly in their fourth week of practice. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?"

I thought a Patronus would -- charge the dementors down or something," said Harry dispiritedly. "Make them disappear --"

"The true Patronus does do that," said Lupin. "But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time. If the dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, You will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground."

"You said it's harder if there are loads of them," said Harry.

"I have complete confidence in you," said Lupin, smiling. "Here -- you've earned a drink - something from the Three Broomsticks. You won't have tried it before --"

He pulled two bottles out of his briefcase.

"Butterbeer!" said Harry, without thinking. "Yeah, I like that stuff!"

Lupin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh -Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade," Harry lied quickly.

I see," said Lupin, though he still looked slightly suspicious. "Well -- let's drink to a Gryffindor victory against Ravenclaw! Not that I'm

supposed to take sides, as a teacher... " he added hastily

They drank the butterbeer in silence, until Harry voiced something he'd been wondering for a while.

"What's under a dementor's hood?"

Professor Lupin lowered his bottle thoughtfully.

"Hmmm... well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon."

"What's that?"

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. "It's what dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and -- and suck out his soul."

Harry accidentally spat out a bit of butterbeer.

"What -- they kill --?"

"Oh no," said Lupin. "Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no... anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever... lost."

Lupin drank a little more butterbeer, then said, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning. The Ministry have given the dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked out through their mouth. But then he thought of Black.

"He deserves it," he said suddenly.

"You think so?" said Lupin lightly. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes," said Harry defiantly. "For... for some things..."

He would have liked to have told Lupin about the conversation he'd overheard about Black in the Three Broomsticks, about Black betraying his mother and father, but it would have involved revealing that he'd gone to Hogsmeade without permission, and he knew Lupin wouldn't be very impressed by that. So he finished his butterbeer, thanked Lupin, and left the History of Magic classroom.

Harry half wished that he hadn't asked what was under a dementor's hood, the answer had been so horrible, and he was so lost in unpleasant thoughts of what it would feel like to have your soul sucked out of you that he walked headlong into Professor McGonagall halfway up the stairs.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter!"

"Sorry, Professor --"

"I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room, Well, here it is, we've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. You've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter...."

Harry's jaw dropped. She was holding out his Firebolt, and it looked as magnificent as ever.

"I can have it back?" Harry said weakly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," said Professor McGonagall, and she was actually smiling. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match, won't you? And Potter -- do try and win, won't you? Or we'll be out of the running for the eighth year. in a row, as Professor Snape was kind enough to remind me only last night...."

Speechless, Harry carried the Firebolt back upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower. As he turned a corner, he saw Ron dashing toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

"She gave it to You? Excellent! Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah... anything," said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been in a month. "You know what -- we should make up with Hermione.... She was only trying to help...."

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. "She's in the common room how working, for a change --"

They turned into the corridor to Gryffindor Tower and saw Neville Longbottom, pleading with Sir Cadogan, who seemed to be refusing him entrance.

"I wrote them down!" Neville was saying tearfully. "But I must've dropped them somewhere!"

"A likely tale!" roared Sir Cadogan. Then, spotting Harry and Ron: "Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this loon in irons. He is trying to force entry to the chambers within!"

"Oh, shut up," said Ron as he and Harry drew level with Neville.

"I've lost the passwords!" Neville told them miserably. "I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this week, because he keeps changing them, and now I don't know what I've done with them!"

"Oddsbodikins," said Harry to Sir Cadogan, who looked extremely disappointed and reluctantly swung forward to let them into the common room. There was a sudden, excited murmur as every head turned and the next moment, Harry was surrounded by people exclaiming over his Firebolt.

"Where'd you get it, Harry?"

"Will you let me have a go?" "Have you ridden it yet, Harry?"

"Ravenclaw'll have no chance, they're all on Cleansweep Sevens!"

"Can I just hold it, Harry?"

After ten minutes or so, during which the Firebolt was Passed around and admired from every angle, the crowd dispersed and Harry and Ron had a clear view of Hermione, the only person who hadn't rushed over to them, bent over her work and carefully avoiding their eyes. Harry and Ron approached her table and at last, she looked up.

"I got it back," said Harry, grinning at her and holding up the Firebolt.

"See, Hermione? There wasn't anything wrong with it!" said Ron.

"Well -- there might have been!" said Hermione. "I mean, at least you know now that it's safe!"

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Harry. "Id better put it upstairs."

"I'll take it!" said Ron eagerly. "I've got to give Scabbers his rat tonic."

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys' staircase.

"Can I sit down, then?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I suppose so," said Hermione, moving a great stack of parchment off a chair.

Harry looked around at the cluttered table, at the long Arithmancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the even longer Muggle Studies essay ("Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity" and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

"How are you getting through all this stuff?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, well -- you know -- working hard," said Hermione. Close-up, Harry saw that she looked almost as tired as Lupin.

"Why don't you just drop a couple of subjects?" Harry asked, watching

her lifting books as she searched for her rune dictionary.

"I couldn't do that!" said Hermione, looking scandalized.

"Arithmancy looks terrible," said Harry, picking up a very complicated-looking number chart.

"Oh no, it's wonderful!" said Hermione earnestly. "It's my favorite subject! It's --"

But exactly what was wonderful about Arithmancy, Harry never found out. At that precise moment, a strangled yell echoed down the boys' staircase. The whole common room fell silent, staring, petrified, at the entrance. Then came hurried footsteps, growing louder and louder -- and then Ron came leaping into view, dragging with him a bedsheet.

"LOOK!" he bellowed, striding over to Hermione's table.

"LOOK!" he yelled, shaking the sheets in her face.

"Ron, what --?"

"SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!"

Hermione was leaning away from Ron, looking utterly bewildered. Harry looked down at the sheet Ron was holding. There was something red on it. Something that looked horribly like --

"BLOOD!" Ron yelled into the stunned silence. "HE'S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?"

"N -- no," said Hermione in a trembling voice.

Ron threw something down onto Hermione's rune translation. Hermione and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRYFFINDOR VERSUS RAVENCLAW

It looked like the end of Ron and Hermione's friendship. Each was so angry with the other that Harry couldn't see how they'd ever make up.

Ron was enraged that Hermione had never taken Crookshanks's attempts to eat Scabbers seriously, hadn't bothered to keep a close enough watch on him, and was still trying to pretend that Crookshanks was innocent by suggesting that Ron look for Scabbers under all the boys' beds.

Hermione, meanwhile, maintained fiercely that Ron had no proof that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, that the ginger hairs might have been there since Christmas, and that Ron had been prejudiced against her cat ever since Crookshanks had landed on Ron's head in the Magical Menagerie.

Personally, Harry was sure that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, and when he tried to point out to Hermione that the evidence all pointed that way, she lost her temper with Harry too.

"Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!" she said shrilly. "First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything's my fault, isn't it! just leave me alone, Harry, I've got a lot of work to do!"

Ron had taken the loss of his rat very hard indeed.

"Come on, Ron, you were always saying how boring Scabbers was," said Fred bracingly. "And he's been off-color for ages, he was wasting away. It was probably better for him to snuff it quickly -- one swallow -- he probably didn't feel a thing."

"Fred!" said Ginny indignantly.

"All he did was eat and sleep, Ron, you said it yourself," said George.

"He bit Goyle for us once!" Ron said miserably. "Remember, Harry?"

"Yeah, that's true," said Harry.

"His finest hour," said Fred, unable to keep a straight face. "Let the scar on Goyle's finger stand as a lasting tribute to his memory. Oh,

come on, Ron, get yourself down to Hogsmeade and buy a new rat, what's the point of moaning?"

In a last-ditch attempt to cheer Ron up, Harry persuaded him to come along to the Gryffindor team's final practice before the Ravenclaw match, so that he could have a ride on the Firebolt after they'd finished. This did seem to take Ron's mind off Scabbers for a moment ("Great! Can I try and shoot a few goals on it?") so they set off for the Quidditch field together.

Madam Hooch, who was still overseeing Gryffindor practices to keep an eye on Harry, was just as impressed with the Firebolt as everyone else had been. She took it in her hands before takeoff and gave them the benefit of her professional opinion.

"Look at the balance on it! If the Nimbus series has a fault, it's a slight list to the tail end -- you often find they develop a drag after a few years. They've updated the handle too, a bit slimmer than the Cleansweeps, reminds me of the old Silver Arrows -- a Pity they've stopped making them. I learned to fly on one, and a very fine old broom it was too...."

She continued in this vein for some time, until Wood said, "Er -- Madam Hooch? Is it okay if Harry has the Firebolt back? We need to practice...."

"Oh -- right -- here you are, then, Potter," said Madam Hooch. "I'll sit over here with Weasley...."

She and Ron left the field to sit in the stadium, and the Gryffindor team gathered around Wood for his final instructions for tomorrow's match.

"Harry, I've just found out who Ravenclaw is playing as Seeker. It's Cho Chang. She's a fourth year, and she's pretty good.... I really hoped she wouldn't be fit, she's had some problems with injuries...." Wood scowled his displeasure that Cho Chang had made a full recovery, then said, "On the other hand, she rides a Comet Two Sixty, which is going to look like a joke next to the Firebolt." He gave Harry's broom a look of fervent admiration, then said, "Okay, everyone, let's go -- "

And at long last, Harry mounted his Firebolt, and kicked off from the ground.

It was better than he'd ever dreamed. The Firebolt turned with the lightest touch; it seemed to obey his thoughts rather than his grip; it sped across the field at such speed that the stadium turned into a green-and-gray blur; Harry turned it so sharply that Alicia Spinnet screamed, then he went into a perfectly controlled dive, brushing the grassy field with his toes before rising thirty, forty, fifty feet into the air again.

"Harry, I'm letting the Snitch out!" Wood called.

Harry turned and raced a Bludger toward the goal posts; he outstripped it easily, saw the Snitch dart out from behind Wood, and within ten seconds had caught it tightly in his hand.

The team cheered madly. Harry let the Snitch go again, gave it a minute's head start, then tore after it, weaving in and out of the others; he spotted it lurking near Katie Bell's knee, looped her easily, and caught it again.

It was the best practice ever; the team, inspired by the presence of the Firebolt in their midst, performed their best moves faultlessly, and by the time they hit the ground again, Wood didn't have a single criticism to make, which, as George Weasley pointed out, was a first.

"I can't see what's going to stop us tomorrow!" said Wood. "Not unless -- Harry, you've sorted out your dementor problem, haven't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry, thinking of his feeble Patronus and wishing it were stronger.

"The dementors won't turn up again, Oliver. Dumbledore'd go ballistic," said Fred confidently.

"Well, let's hope not," said Wood. "Anyway -- good work, everyone. Let's get back to the tower... turn in early --"

"I'm staying out for a bit; Ron wants a go on the Firebolt," Harry told Wood, and while the rest of the team headed off to the locker rooms, Harry strode over to Ron, who vaulted the barrier to the stands and came to meet him. Madam Hooch had fallen asleep in her seat.

"Here you go," said Harry, handing Ron the Firebolt.

Ron, an expression of ecstasy on his face, mounted the broom and zoomed off into the gathering darkness while Harry walked around the edge of the field, watching him. Night had fallen before Madam Hooch awoke with a start, told Harry and Ron off for not waking her, and insisted that they go back to the castle.

Harry shouldered the Firebolt and he and Ron walked out of the shadowy stadium, discussing the Firebolt's superbly smooth action, its phenomenal acceleration, and its pinpoint turning. They were halfway toward the castle when Harry, glancing to his left, saw something that made his heart turn over -- a pair of eyes, gleaming out of the darkness.

Harry stopped dead, his heart banging against his ribs.

"What's the matter?" said Ron.

Harry pointed. Ron pulled out his wand and muttered, "Lumos!"

A beam of light fell across the grass, hit the bottom of a tree, and illuminated its branches; there, crouching among the budding leaves, was Crookshanks.

"Get out of here!" Ron roared, and he stooped down and seized a stone lying on the grass, but before he could do anything else, Crookshanks had vanished with one swish of his long ginger tail.

"See?" Ron said furiously, chucking the stone down again. "She's still letting him wander about wherever he wants -- probably washing down Scabbers with a couple of birds now...."

Harry didn't say anything. He took a deep breath as relief seeped through him; he had been sure for a moment that those eyes had belonged

to the Grim. They set off for the castle once more. slightly ashamed of his moment of panic, Harry didn't say anything to Ron -- nor did he look left or right until they had reached the well-lit entrance hall.

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning with the rest of the boys in his dormitory, all of whom seemed to think the Firebolt deserved a sort of guard of honor. As Harry entered the Great Hall, heads turned in the direction of the Firebolt, and there was a good deal of excited muttering. Harry saw, with enormous satisfaction, that the Slytherin team were all looking thunderstruck.

"Did you see his face?" said Ron gleefully, looking back at Malfay. "He can't believe it! This is brilliant!"

Wood, too, was basking in the reflected glory of the Firebolt.

"Put it here, Harry," he said, laying the broom in the middle of the table and carefully turning it so that its name faced upward. People from the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were soon coming over to look. Cedric Diggory came over to congratulate Harry on having acquired such a superb replacement for his Nimbus, and Percy's Ravenclaw girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, asked if she could actually hold the Firebolt.

"Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!" said Percy heartily as she examined the Firebolt closely. "Penelope and I have got a bet on," he told the team. "Ten Galleons on the outcome of the match!"

Penelope put the Firebolt down again, thanked Harry, and went back to her table.

"Harry -- make sure you win," said Percy, in an urgent whisper. "I haven't got ten Galleons. Yes, I'm coming, Penny!" And he bustled off to join her in a piece of toast.

"Sure you can manage that broom, Potter?" said a cold, drawling voice.

Draco Malfoy had arrived for a closer look, Crabbe and Coyle right behind him.

"Yeah, reckon so," said Harry casually.

"Got plenty of special features, hasn't it?" said Malfoy, eyes glittering maliciously. "Shame it doesn't come with a parachute -- in case you get too near a dementor."

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"Pity you can't attach an extra arm to yours, Malfoy," said Harry. "Then it could catch the Snitch for you."

The Gryffindor team laughed loudly. Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed, and he stalked away. They watched him rejoin the rest of the Slytherin team, who put their heads together, no doubt asking Malfoy whether Harry's broom really was a Firebolt.

At a quarter to eleven, the Gryffindor team set off for the locker rooms. The weather couldn't have been more different from their match against Hufflepuff. It was a clear, cool day with a very light breeze; there would be no visibility problems this time, and Harry, though nervous, was starting to feel the excitement only a Quidditch match could bring. They could hear the rest of the school moving into the stadium beyond. Harry took off his black school robes, removed his wand from his pocket, and stuck it inside the T-shirt he was going to wear under his Quidditch robes. He only hoped he wouldn't need it. He wondered suddenly whether Professor Lupin was in the crowd, watching.

"You know what we've got to do," said Wood as they prepared to leave the locker rooms. "If we lose this match, we're out of the running. just -- just fly like you did in practice yesterday, and we'll be okay!"

They walked out onto the field to tumultuous applause. The Ravenclaw team, dressed in blue, were already standing in the middle of the field. Their Seeker, Cho Chang, was the only girl on their team. She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn't think had anything to do with nerves.

"Wood, Davies, shake hands," Madam Hooch said briskly, and Wood shook

hands with the Ravenclaw Captain.

"Mount your brooms... on my whistle... three -- two -- one --"

Harry kicked off into the air and the Firebolt zoomed higher and faster than any other broom; he soared around the stadium and began squinting around for the Snitch, listening all the while to the commentary, which was being provided by the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan.

"They're off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to Which Broomstick, the Firebolt's going to be the broom of choice for the national teams at this year's World Championship --"

"Jordan, would you mind telling us what's going on in the match?" interrupted Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Right you are, Professor -- just giving a bit of background information -- the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in auto-brake and --"

"Jordan!"

"Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor, heading for goal..."

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was tailing him closely. She was undoubtedly a very good flier -- she kept cutting across him, forcing him to change direction.

"Show her your acceleration, Harry!" Fred yelled as he whooshed past in pursuit of a Bludger that was aiming for Alicia.

Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Ravenclaw goal posts and Cho fell behind. Just as Katie succeeded in scoring the first goal of the match, and the Gryffindor end of the field went wild, he saw it -- the Snitch was close to the ground, flitting near one of the barriers.

Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him -- Harry was

speeding up, excitement flooding him; dives were his speciality, he was ten feet away --

Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelting out of nowhere; Harry veered off course, avoiding it by an inch, and in those few, crucial seconds, the Snitch had vanished.

There was a great "Ooooooh" of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beater from the Ravenclaw end. George Weasley vented his feelings by hitting the second Bludger directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

"Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter's really putting it through its paces now, see it turn -- Chang's Comet is just no match for it, the Firebolt's precision- balance is really noticeable in these long --"

"JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIREBOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY!"

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead -- if Cho got the Snitch before him, Ravenclaw would win. Harry dropped lower, narrowly avoiding a Ravenclaw Chaser, scanning the field frantically -- a glint of gold, a flutter of tiny wings -- the Snitch was circling the Gryffindor goal post --

Harry accelerated, eyes fixed on the speck of gold ahead -- but just then, Cho appeared out of thin air, blocking him --

"HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN!" Wood roared as Harry swerved to avoid a collision. "KNOCK HER OFF HER BROOM IF YOU HAVE TO!"

Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. The Snitch had vanished again. Harry turned his Firebolt upward and was soon twenty feet above the game. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho following him.... She'd decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself... All right, then... if she wanted to tail him, she'd have to

take the consequences....

He dived again, and Cho, thinking he'd seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she hurtled downward; he rose fast as a bullet once more, and then saw it, for the third time -- the Snitch was glittering way above the field at the Ravenclaw end.

He accelerated; so, many feet below, did Cho. He was winning, gaining on the Snitch with every second -- then --

"Oh!" screamed Cho, pointing.

Distracted, Harry looked down.

Three dementors, three tall, black, hooded dementors, were looking up at him.

He didn't stop to think. Plunging a hand down the neck of his robes, he whipped out his wand and roared, "Expecto patronum!"

Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. He knew it had shot directly at the dementors but didn't pause to watch; his mind still miraculously clear, he looked ahead -- he was nearly there. He stretched out the hand still grasping his wand and just managed to close his fingers over the small, struggling Snitch.

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. Harry turned around in midair and saw six scarlet blurs bearing down on him; next moment, the whole team was hugging him so hard he was nearly pulled off his broom. Down below he could hear the roars of the Gryffindors in the crowd.

"That's my boy!" Wood kept yelling. Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had all kissed Harry; Fred had him in a grip so tight Harry felt as though his head would come off. In complete disarray, the team managed to make its way back to the ground. Harry got off his broom and looked up to see a gaggle of Gryffindor supporters sprinting onto the field, Ron in the lead. Before he knew it, he had been engulfed by the cheering crowd.

"Yes!" Ron yelled, yanking Harry's arm into the air. "Yes! Yes!"

"Well done, Harry!" said Percy, looking delighted. "Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me --"

"Good for you, Harry!" roared Seamus Finnigan.

"Ruddy brilliant!" boomed Hagrid over the heads of the milling Gryffindors.

"That was quite some Patronus," said a voice in Harry's ear.

Harry turned around to see Professor Lupin, who looked both shaken and pleased.

"The dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry said excitedly. "I didn't feel a thing!"

"That would be because they -- er -- weren't dementors," said Professor Lupin. "Come and see -- "

He led Harry out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field.

"You gave Mr. Malfoy quite a fright," said Lupin.

Harry stared. Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team Captain, all struggling to remove themselves from long, black, hooded robes. It looked as though Malfoy had been standing on Goyle's shoulders. Standing over them, with an expression of the utmost fury on her face, was Professor McGonagall.

"An unworthy trick!" she was shouting. "A low and cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin! I shall be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!"

If anything could have set the seal on Gryffindor's victory, it was this. Ron, who had fought his way through to Harry's side, doubled up with laughter as they watched Malfoy fighting to extricate himself from the robe, Goyle's head still stuck inside it.

"Come on, Harry!" said George, fighting his way over. "Party! Gryffindor common room, now!"

"Right," said Harry, and feeling happier than he had in ages, he and the rest of the team led the way, still in their scarlet robes, out of the stadium and back up to the castle.

It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George Weasley disappeared for a couple of hours and returned with armfuls of bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets.

"How did you do that?" squealed Angelina Johnson as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd.

"With a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Fred muttered in Harry's ear.

Only one person wasn't joining in the festivities. Hermione, incredibly, was sitting in a corner, attempting to read an enormous book entitled *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles*. Harry broke away from the table where Fred and George had started juggling butterbeer bottles and went over to her.

"Did you even come to the match?" he asked her.

"Of course I did," said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. "And I'm very glad we won, and I think you did really well, but I need to read this by Monday."

"Come on, Hermione, come and have some food," Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in a good enough mood to bury the hatchet.

"I can't, Harry. I've still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!" said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical. "Anyway..." She glanced over at Ron too. "He doesn't want me to join in."

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly,

"If Scabbers hadn't just been eaten, he could have had some of those Fudge Flies. He used to really like them --"

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry could say or do anything, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and, still sobbing, ran toward the staircase to the girls' dormitories and out of sight.

"Can't you give her a break?" Harry asked Ron quietly.

"No," said Ron flatly. "If she just acted like she was sorry -- but she'll never admit she's wrong, Hermione. She's still acting like Scabbers has gone on vacation or something."

The Gryffindor party ended only when Professor McGonagall turned up in her tartan dressing gown and hair net at one in the morning, to insist that they all go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their dormitory, still discussing the match. At last, exhausted, Harry climbed into bed, twitched the hangings of his four-poster shut to block out a ray of moonlight, lay back, and felt himself almost instantly drifting off to sleep....

He had a very strange dream. He was walking through a forest, his Firebolt over his shoulder, following something silvery-white. It was winding its way through the trees ahead, and he could only catch glimpses of it between the leaves. Anxious to catch up with it, he sped up, but as he moved faster, so did his quarry. Harry broke into a run, and ahead he heard hooves gathering speed. Now he was running flat out, and ahead he could hear galloping. Then he turned a corner into a clearing and -

"AAARRGGHH! NOOO!"

Harry woke as suddenly as though he'd been hit in the face. Disoriented in the total darkness, he fumbled with his hangings, he could hear movements around him, and Seamus Finnigan's voice from the other side of the room: "What's going on?"

Harry thought he heard the dormitory door slam. At last finding the divide in his curtains, he ripped them back, and at the same moment, Dean Thomas lit his lamp.

Ron was sitting up in bed, the hangings torn from one side, a look of utmost terror on his face.

"Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!"

"What?"

"Here! Just now! Slashed the curtains! Woke me up!"

"You sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?" said Dean.

"Look at the curtains! I tell you, he was here!"

They all scrambled out of bed; Harry reached the dormitory door first, and they sprinted back down the staircase. Doors opened behind them, and sleepy voices called after them.

"Who shouted?"

"What're you doing?"

The common room was lit with the glow of the dying fire, still littered with the debris from the party. It was deserted.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him!"

"What's all the noise?"

"Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!"

A few of the girls had come down their staircase, pulling on, dressing gowns and yawning. Boys, too, were reappearing.

"Excellent, are we carrying on?" said Fred Weasley brightly.

"Everyone back upstairs!" said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajamas as he spoke.

"Perce -- Sirius Black!" said Ron faintly. "In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!"

The common room went very still.

"Nonsense!" said Percy, looking startled. "You had too much to eat, Ron -- had a nightmare --"

"I'm telling you --"

"Now, really, enough's enough!"

Professor McGonagall was back. She slammed the portrait behind her as she entered the common room and stared furiously around.

"I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!"

"I certainly didn't authorize this, Professor!" said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. "I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare --"

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE!" Ron yelled. "PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!"

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?"

"Ask him!" said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan's picture. "Ask him if he saw --"

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the Portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room listened with bated breath. "Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?" "Certainly, good lady!" cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the common room.

"You -- you did?" said Professor McGonagall. "But -- but the password!"

"He had 'em!" said Sir Cadogan proudly. "Had the whole week's, my lady! Read 'em off a little piece of paper!"

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

"Which person," she said, her voice shaking, "which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week's passwords and left them lying around?"

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy slippers, raised his hand slowly into the air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SNAPE'S GRUDGE

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House stayed awake in the common room, waiting to hear whether Black had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching the front doors to recognize a large picture of Sirius Black; Filch was suddenly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. Sir Cadogan had been fired. His portrait had been taken back to its lonely landing on the seventh floor, and the Fat Lady was back. She had been expertly restored, but was still extremely nervous, and had agreed to return to her job only on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They paced the corridor in a menacing group, talking in grunts and comparing the size of their clubs.

Harry couldn't help noticing that the statue of the one-eyed witch on the third floor remained unguarded and unblocked. It seemed that Fred

and George had been right in thinking that they -- and now Harry, Ron, and Hermione -- were the only ones who knew about the hidden passageway within it.

"D'you reckon we should tell someone?" Harry asked Ron.

"We know he's not coming in through Honeyduke's," said Ron dismissively. "We'd've heard if the shop had been broken into."

Harry was glad Ron took this view. If the one-eyed witch was boarded up too, he would never be able to go into Hogsmeade again.

Ron had become an instant celebrity. For the first time in his life, people were paying more attention to him than to Harry, and it was clear that Ron was rather enjoying the experience. Though still severely shaken by the night's events, he was happy to tell anyone who asked what had happened, with a wealth of detail.

"... I was asleep, and I heard this ripping noise, and I thought it was in my dream, you know? But then there was this draft... I woke up and one side of the hangings on my bed had been pulled down.... I rolled over... and I saw him standing over me... like a skeleton, with loads of filthy hair ... holding this great long knife, must've been twelve inches... and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then I yelled, and he scampered.

"Why, though?" Ron added to Harry as the group of secondyear girls who had been listening to his chilling tale departed. "Why did he run?"

Harry had been wondering the same thing. Why had Black, having got the wrong bed, not silenced Ron and proceeded to Harry? Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind murdering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep.

"He must've known he'd have a job getting back out of the castle once you'd yelled and woken people up," said Harry thoughtfully. "He'd've had to kill the whole House to get back through the portrait hole... then he would've met the teachers...."

Neville was in total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furious with

him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade visits, given him a detention, and forbidden anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in, while the security trolls leered unpleasantly at him. None of these punishments, however, came close to matching the one his grandmother had in store for him. Two days after Black's break-in, she sent Neville the very worst thing a Hogwarts student could receive over breakfast -- a Howler.

The school owls swooped into the Great Hall carrying the mail as usual, and Neville choked as a huge barn owl landed in front of him, a scarlet envelope clutched in its beak. Harry and Ron, who were sitting opposite him, recognized the letter as a Howler at once -- Ron had got one from his mother the year before.

"Run for it, Neville," Ron advised.

Neville didn't need telling twice. He seized the envelope, and holding it before him like a bomb, sprinted out of the hall, while the Slytherin table exploded with laughter at the sight of him. They heard the Howler go off in the entrance hall -- Neville's grandmother's voice, magically magnified to a hundred times its usual volume, shrieking about how he had brought shame on the whole family.

Harry was too busy feeling sorry for Neville to notice immediately that he had a letter too. Hedwig got his attention by nipping him sharply on the wrist.

"Ouch! Oh -- thanks, Hedwig."

Harry tore open the envelope while Hedwig helped herself to some of Neville's cornflakes. The note inside said:

Dear Harry and Ron, How about having tea with me this afternoon 'round six? I'll come collect you from the castle. WAIT FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE HALL; YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED OUT ON YOUR OWN. Cheers, Hagrid

"He probably wants to hear all about Black!" said Ron.

So at six o'clock that afternoon, Harry and Ron left Gryffindor Tower,

passed the security trolls at a run, and headed down to the entrance hall.

Hagrid was already waiting for them.

"All right, Hagrid!" said Ron. "S'pose you want to hear about Saturday night, do you?"

"I've already heard all abou' it," said Hagrid, opening the front doors and leading them outside.

"Oh," said Ron, looking slightly put out.

The first thing they saw on entering Hagrid's cabin was Buckbeak, who was stretched out on top of Hagrid's patchwork quilt, his enormous wings folded tight to his body, enjoying a large plate of dead ferrets.

Averting his eyes from this unpleasant sight, Harry saw a gigantic, hairy brown suit and a very horrible yellow-and-orange tie hanging from the top of Hagrid's wardrobe door.

"What are they for, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"Buckbeaks case against the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures," said Hagrid. "This Friday. Him an' me'll be goin' down ter London together. I've booked two beds on the Knight Bus...."

Harry felt a nasty pang of guilt. He had completely forgotten that Buckbeak's trial was so near, and judging by the uneasy look on Ron's face, he had too. They had also forgotten their promise about helping him prepare Buckbeak's defense; the arrival of the Firebolt had driven it clean out of their minds.

Hagrid poured them tea and offered them a plate of Bath buns but they knew better than to accept; they had had too much experience with Hagrid's cooking.

I got somethin' ter discuss with you two," said Hagrid, sitting himself between them and looking uncharacteristically serious.

"What?" said Harry.

"Hermione," said Hagrid.

"What about her?" said Ron.

"She's in a righ' state, that's what. She's bin comin' down ter visit me a lot since Chris'mas. Bin feelin' lonely. Firs' yeh weren' talking to her because o' the Firebolt, now yer not talkin' to her because her cat --"

"-- ate Scabbers!" Ron interjected angrily.

"Because her cat acted like all cats do," Hagrid continued doggedly. "She's cried a fair few times, yeh know. Goin' through a rough time at the moment. Bitten off more'n she can chew, if yeh ask me, all the work she's tryin' ter do. Still found time ter help me with Buckbeak's case, mind.... She's found some really good stuff fer me... reckon he'll stand a good chance now..."

"Hagrid, we should've helped as well -- sorry --" Harry began awkwardly.

"I'm not blamin' yeh!" said Hagrid, waving Harry's apology aside. "Gawd knows yeh've had enough ter be gettin' on with. I've seen yeh practicin' Quidditch ev'ry hour o' the day an' night -- but I gotta tell yeh, I thought you two'd value yer friend more'n broomsticks or rats. Tha's all."

Harry and Ron exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Really upset, she was, when Black nearly stabbed yeh, Ron. She's got her heart in the right place, Hermione has, an' you two not talkin' to her --"

"If she'd just get rid of that cat, I'd speak to her again!" Ron said angrily. "But she's still sticking up for it! It's a maniac, and she won't hear a word against it!"

"Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid abou' their pets," said Hagrid wisely. Behind him, Buckbeak spat a few ferret bones onto Hagrid's pillow.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor's improved chances for the Quidditch Cup. At nine o'clock, Hagrid walked them back up to the castle.

A large group of people was bunched around the bulletin board when they returned to the common room.

"Hogsmeade, next weekend!" said Ron, craning over the heads to read the new notice. "What d'you reckon?" he added quietly to Harry as they went to sit down.

"Well, Filch hasn't done anything about the passage into Honeydukes...." Harry said, even more quietly.

"Harry!" said a voice in his right ear. Harry started and looked around at Hermione, who was sitting at the table right behind them and clearing a space in the wall of books that had been hiding her.

"Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again... I'll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!" said Hermione.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry?" growled Ron, not looking at Hermione.

"Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black nearly did to you! I mean it, I'll tell --"

"So now you're trying to get Harry expelled!" said Ron furiously. "Haven't you done enough damage this year?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one frightened look at the expression on Ron's face, gathered up Crookshanks, and hurried away toward the girls' dormitories.

"So how about it?" Ron said to Harry as though there had been no interruption. "Come on, last time we went you didn't see anything. You haven't even been inside Zonko's yet!"

Harry looked around to check that Hermione was well out of earshot.

"Okay," he said. "But I'm taking the Invisibility Cloak this time."

On Saturday morning, Harry packed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, slipped the Marauder's Map into his pocket, and went down to breakfast with everyone else. Hermione kept shooting suspicious looks down the table at him, but he avoided her eye and was careful to let her see him walking back up the marble staircase in the entrance hall as everybody else proceeded to the front doors.

"Bye!" Harry called to Ron. "See you when you get back!"

Ron grinned and winked.

Harry hurried up to the third floor, slipping the Marauder's Map out of his pocket as he went. Crouching behind the one-eyed witch, he smoothed it out. A tiny dot was moving in his direction. Harry squinted at it. The minuscule writing next to it read Neville Longbottom.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand, muttered, "Dissendium!" and shoved his bag into the statue, but before he could climb in himself, Neville came around the corner.

"Harry! I forgot you weren't going to Hogsmeade either!"

"Hi, Neville," said Harry, moving swiftly away from the statue and pushing the map back into his pocket. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing," shrugged Neville. "Want a game of Exploding Snap?"

"Er -- not now -- I was going to go to the library and do that vampire essay for Lupin --"

"I'll come with you!" said Neville brightly. "I haven't done it either!"

"Er -- hang on -- yeah, I forgot, I finished it last night!"

"Great, you can help me!" said Neville, his round face anxious. "I don't understand that thing about the garlic at all -- do they have to eat it,

or --"

He broke off with a small gasp, looking over Harry's shoulder.

It was Snape. Neville took a quick step behind Harry.

"And what are you two doing here?" said Snape, coming to a halt and looking from one to the other. "An odd place to meet --"

To Harry's immense disquiet, Snape's black eyes flicked to the doorways on either side of them, and then to the one-eyed witch.

"We're not -- meeting here," said Harry. "We just -- met here."

"Indeed?" said Snape. "You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no good reason.... I suggest the pair of you return to Gryffindor Tower, where you belong."

Harry and Neville set off without another word. As they turned the corner, Harry looked back. Snape was running one of his hands over the one-eyed witch's head, examining it closely.

Harry managed to shake Neville off at the Fat Lady by telling him the password, then pretending he'd left his vampire essay in the library and doubling back. Once out of sight of the security trolls, he pulled out the map again and held it close to his nose.

The third floor corridor seemed to be deserted. Harry scanned the map carefully and saw, with a leap of relief, that the tiny dot labeled Severus Snape was now back in its office.

He sprinted back to the one-eyed witch, opened her hump, heaved himself inside, and slid down to meet his bag at the bottom of the stone chute. He wiped the Marauder's Map blank again, then set off at a run.

Harry, completely hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, emerged into the sunlight outside Honeydukes and prodded Ron in the back.

It's me," he muttered.

"What kept you?" Ron hissed.

"Snape was hanging around."

They set off up the High Street.

"Where are you?" Ron kept muttering out of the corner of his mouth. "Are you still there? This feels weird...."

They went to the post office; Ron pretended to be checking the price of an owl to Bill in Egypt so that Harry could have a good look around. The owls sat hooting softly down at him, at least three hundred of them; from Great Grays right down to tiny little Scops owls ("Local Deliveries Only"), which were so small they could have sat in the palm of Harry's hand.

Then they visited Zonko's, which was so packed with students Harry had to exercise great care not to tread on anyone and cause a panic. There were jokes and tricks to fulfill even Fred's and George's wildest dreams; Harry gave Ron whispered orders and passed him some gold from under the cloak. They left Zonko's with their money bags considerably lighter than they had been on entering, but their pockets bulging with Dungbombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap, and a Nose-Biting Teacup apiece.

The day was fine and breezy, and neither of them felt like staying indoors, so they walked past the Three Broomsticks and climbed a slope to visit the Shrieking Shack, the most haunted dwelling in Britain. It stood a little way above the rest of the village, and even in daylight was slightly creepy, with its boarded windows and dank overgrown garden.

"Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it," said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at it. "I asked Nearly Headless Nick... he says he's heard a very rough crowd lives here. No one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut...."

Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices nearby. Someone was climbing toward the house from the other side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy

was speaking.

"... should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm... about how I couldn't use it for three months...."

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"I really wish I could hear that great hairy moron trying to defend himself... 'There's no 'arm in 'im, 'onest that hippogriff's as good as dead --"

Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin.

"What are you doing, Weasley?"

Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron.

"Suppose You'd love to live here, wouldn't you, Weasley? Dreaming about having your own bedroom? I heard your family all sleep in one room -- is that true?"

Harry seized the back of Ron's robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy. "Leave him to me," he hissed in Ron's ear.

The opportunity was too perfect to miss. Harry crept silently around behind Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, bent down, and scooped a large handful of mud out of the path.

"We were just discussing your friend Hagrid," Malfoy said to Ron. "Just trying to imagine what he's saying to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. D'you think he'll cry when they cut off his hippogriff's

SPLAT.

Malfoy's head jerked forward as the mud hit him; his silverblond hair was suddenly dripping in muck.

"What the --?"

Ron had to hold onto the fence to keep himself standing, he was laughing so hard. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle spun stupidly on the spot, staring wildly around, Malfoy trying to wipe his hair clean.

"What was that? 'Who did that?'"

"Very haunted up here, isn't it?" said Ron, with the air of one commenting on the weather.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking scared. Their bulging muscles were no use against ghosts. Malfoy was staring madly around at the deserted landscape.

Harry sneaked along the path, where a particularly sloppy puddle yielded some foul-smelling, green sludge.

SPLATTER.

Crabbe and Goyle caught some this time. Goyle hopped furiously on the spot, trying to rub it out of his small, dull eyes.

"It came from over there!" said Malfoy, wiping his face, and staring at a spot some six feet to the left of Harry.

Crabbe blundered forward, his long arms outstretched like a zombie. Harry dodged around him, picked up a stick, and lobbed it at Crabbe's back. Harry doubled up with silent laughter as Crabbe did a kind of pirouette in midair, trying to see who had thrown it. As Ron was the only person Crabbe could see, it was Ron he started toward, but Harry stuck out his leg. Crabbe stumbled -- and his huge, flat foot caught the hem of Harry's cloak. Harry felt a great tug, then the cloak slid off his face.

For a split second, Malfoy stared at him.

"AAARGH!" he yelled, pointing at Harry's head. Then he turned tail and ran, at breakneck speed, back down the hill, Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Harry tugged the cloak up again, but the damage was done.

"Harry!" Ron said, stumbling forward and staring hopelessly at the point where Harry had disappeared, "you'd better run for it! If Malfoy tells anyone -- you'd better get back to the castle, quick --" "See you later," said Harry, and without another word, he tore back down the path toward Hogsmeade.

Would Malfoy believe what he had seen? Would anyone believe

Malfoy? Nobody knew about the Invisibility Cloak -- nobody except Dumbledore. Harry's stomach turned over -- Dumbledore would know exactly what had happened, if Malfoy said any- thing --

Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor -- Harry pulled off the cloak, tucked it under his arm, and ran, flat out, along the passage.... Malfoy would get back first... how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side, Harry didn't slow down until he reached the stone slide. He would have to leave the cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher -- he hid it in a shadowy corner, then started to climb, fast as he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch's hump, tapped it with his wand, stuck his head through, and hoisted himself out; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching.

It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him.

"So," he said.

There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and his muddy hands, which he quickly hid in his pockets.

"Come with me, Potter," said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the

inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They walked down the stairs to the dungeons and then into Snape's office.

Harry had been in here only once before, and he had been in very serious trouble then too. Snape had acquired a few more slimy horrible things in jars since last time, all standing on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

"Sit," said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained, standing.

"Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter," said Snape.

Harry didn't say anything.

"He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley -- apparently alone."

Still, Harry didn't speak.

"Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head. How do you think that could have happened?"

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

"I don't know, Professor."

Snape's eyes were boring into Harry's. It was exactly like trying to stare down a hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

"Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, now trying to sound innocently curious.

"It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe he'd better go to Madam Pomfrey," said Harry. "If he's seeing things like --"

"What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter?" said Snape softly. "Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade."

"I know that," said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. "It sounds like Malfoy's having hallucin --"

"Malfoy is not having hallucinations," snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry's chair, so that their faces were a foot apart. "If your head was in Hogsmeade, so was the rest of you."

"I've been up in Gryffindor Tower," said Harry. "Like you told --" "Can anyone confirm that?"

Harry didn't say anything. Snape's thin mouth curled into a horrible smile.

"So," he said, straightening up again. "Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences."

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn't going to do it. Snape had no proof -- yet.

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. "He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers... The resemblance between you is uncanny."

"My dad didn't strut," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "And neither do I."

"Your father didn't set much store by rules either," Snape went on, pressing his advantage, his thin face full of malice. "Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen --"

"SHUT UP!"

Harry was suddenly on his feet. Rage such as he had not felt since his last night in Privet Drive was coursing through him. He didn't care that Snape's face had gone rigid, the black eyes flashing dangerously.

"What did you say to me, Potter?"

"I told you to shut up about my dad!" Harry yelled. I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my dad!"

Snape's sallow skin had gone the color of sour milk.

"And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?" he whispered. "Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter's delicate ears?"

Harry bit his lip. He didn't know what had happened and didn't want to admit it -- but Snape seemed to have guessed the truth.

I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your father, Potter," he said, a terrible grin twisting his face. "Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you -- your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn't got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hogwarts."

Snape's uneven, yellowish teeth were bared.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!" he spat suddenly.

Harry didn't move. There was a pounding in his ears.

"Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!"

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko's tricks and the Marauder's Map.

Snap picked up the Zonko's bag.

"Ron gave them to me," said Harry, praying he'd get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. "He -brought them back from Hogsmeade last time --"

"Indeed? And you've been carrying them around ever since? How very touching... and what is this?"

Snape had picked up the map. Harry tried with all his might to keep his face impassive.

"Spare bit of parchment," he said with a shrug.

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

"Surely you don't need such a very old piece of parchment?" he said. "Why don't I just -- throw this away?"

His hand moved toward the fire.

"No!" Harry said quickly.

"So!" said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. "Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it -- something else? A letter, perhaps, written in invisible ink? Or -- instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the dementors?"

Harry blinked. Snape's eyes gleamed.

"Let me see, let me see...." he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. "Reveal your secret!" he said, touching the wand to the parchment.

Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

"Show yourself!" Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

"Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!" Snape said, hitting the map with his wand.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the map.

Mooney presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business."

Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn't stop there. More writing was appearing beneath the first.

"Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugle git."

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. And there was more....

"Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair , the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So..." said Snape softly. "We'll see about this...."

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin was clambering out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this."

Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shining. An odd, closed expression appeared on Lupin's face.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

"Well?" said Snape again. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?"

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry's direction, warned him not to interrupt.

"Full of Dark Magic?" he repeated mildly. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop --"

"Indeed?" said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufacturers?"

Harry didn't understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, apparently, did Lupin.

"You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he said. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry quickly.

"You see, Severus?" said Lupin, turning back to Snape. "It looks like a Zonko product to me --"

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was completely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape's desk, clutching the stitch in his chest and trying to speak.

"I -- gave -- Harry -- that -- stuff," he choked. "Bought -- it... in Zonko's... ages -- ago..."

"Well!" said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I?" He folded the map and tucked it inside his robes. "Harry, Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vampire essay -- excuse us, Severus --"

Harry didn't dare look at Snape as they left his office. He, Ron, and Lupin walked all the way back into the entrance hall before speaking. Then Harry turned to Lupin.

"Professor, I --"

"I don't want to hear explanations," said Lupin shortly. He glanced around the empty entrance hall and lowered his voice. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr. Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said as Harry and Ron looked amazed. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, astounded that you didn't hand it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Harry."

Harry had expected that, and was too keen for explanations to protest.

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because...", Lupin hesitated, "because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it extremely entertaining."

"Do you know them?" said Harry, impressed.

"We've met," he said shortly. He was looking at Harry more seriously than ever before.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry. I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them -- gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."

He walked away, leaving Harry feeling worse by far than he had at any point in Snape's office. Slowly, he and Ron mounted the marble staircase. As Harry passed the one-eyed witch, he remembered the Invisibility Cloak -- it was still down there, but he didn't dare go and get it.

"It's my fault," said Ron abruptly. "I persuaded you to go. Lupin's right, it was stupid, we shouldn't've done it --"

He broke off; they reached the corridor where the security trolls were pacing, and Hermione was walking toward them. One look at her face convinced Harry that she had heard what had happened. His heart plummeted -- had she told Professor McGonagall?

"Come to have a good gloat?" said Ron savagely as she stopped in front of them. "Or have you just been to tell on us?"

"No," said Hermione. She was holding a letter in her hands and her lip was trembling. "I just thought you ought to know... Hagrid lost his case. Buckbeak is going to be executed."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE QUIDDITCH FINAL

He sent me this," Hermione said, holding out the letter.

Harry took it. The parchment was damp, and enormous teardrops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was very difficult to read.

Dear Hermione, We lost. I'm allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts. Execution date to be fixed. Beaky has enjoyed London. I won't forget all the help you gave us.

Hagrid

"They can't do this," said Harry. "They can't. Buckbeak isn't dangerous."

"Malfoy's dad's frightened the Committee into it," said Hermione, wiping her eyes. "You know what he's like. They're a bunch of dodderly old fools, and they were scared. There'll be an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can't see any hope.... Nothing will have changed."

"Yeah, it will," said Ron fiercely. "You won't have to do all the work alone this time, Hermione. I'll help."

"Oh, Ron!"

Hermione flung her arms around Ron's neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her very awkwardly on the top of the head. Finally, Hermione drew away.

"Ron, I'm really, really sorry about Scabbers..." she sobbed.

"Oh -- well -- he was old," said Ron, looking thoroughly relieved that she had let go of him. "And he was a bit useless. You never know, Mum and Dad might get me an owl now."

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black's second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to go and visit Hagrid in the evenings. Their only chance of talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

"S'all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin' there in black robes an' I kep' droppin' me notes and forgettin' all them dates yeh looked up fer me, Hermione. An' then Lucius Malfoy stood up an' said his bit, and the Committee jus' did exac'ly what he told 'em...."

"There's still the appeal!" said Ron fiercely. "Don't give up Yet, we're working on it!"

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle, and kept looking back, laughing derisively.

"S'no good, Ron," said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. "That Committee's in Lucius Malfoy's pocket. I'm jus' gonna make sure the rest o' Beaky's time is the happiest he's ever had. I owe him that...."

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

"Look at him blubber!"

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

"Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" said Malfoy. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!"

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first -- SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul -- you evil --"

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung

it back.

"Get off, Ron!"

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

"C'mon," Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

"Hermione!" Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

"Harry, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!" Hermione said shrilly. "You just better had, because I can't stand it if Slytherin wins!"

"We're due in Charms," said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. "We'd better go."

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"You're late, boys!" said Professor Flitwick reprovably as Harry opened the classroom door. "Come along, quickly, wands out, we're experimenting with Cheering Charms today, we've already divided into pairs --"

Harry and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

"Where's Hermione gone?"

Harry looked around too. Hermione hadn't entered the classroom, yet Harry knew she had been right next to him when he had opened the door.

"That's weird," said Harry, staring at Ron. "Maybe -- maybe she went to the bathroom or something?"

But Hermione didn't turn up all lesson.

"She could've done with a Cheering Charm on her too," said Ron as the

class left for lunch, all grinning broadly -- the Cheering Charms had left them with a feeling of great contentment.

Hermione wasn't at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charms were wearing off, and Harry and Ron had started to get slightly worried.

"You don't think Malfoy did something to her?" Ron said anxiously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password ("Flibbertigibbet"), and scrambled through the portrait hole into the common room.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on either side of her. Harry prodded her awake.

"Wh -- what?" said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. "Is it time to go? W -- which lesson have we got now?"

"Divination, but it's not for another twenty minutes," said Harry. "Hermione, why didn't you come to Charms?"

"What? Oh no!" Hermione squeaked. "I forgot to go to Charms!"

"But how could you forget?" said Harry. "You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!"

"I don't believe it!" Hermione wailed. "Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I lost track of things!"

"You know what, Hermione?" said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a pillow. "I reckon you're cracking up. You're trying to do too much."

"No, I'm not!" said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. "I just made a mistake, that's all! I'd better go and see Professor Flitwick and say sorry... I'll see you in Divination!"

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawneys classroom twenty minutes later, looking extremely harrassed.

"I can't believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might!"

Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of pearly white mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down together at the same rickety table.

"I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next term," Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney, in case she was lurking nearby.

"Don't complain, this means we've finished palmistry," Harry muttered back. "I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands."

"Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Parvati and Lavender quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

"I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned," said Professor Trelawney, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. "The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Hermione snorted.

"Well, honestly... 'the fates have informed her' who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!" she said, not troubling to keep her voice low. Harry and Ron choked back laughs.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, however, as though she had not.

"Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," she said dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes" -- Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the noise -- "so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will see before the end of the class."

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty when thoughts such as "this is stupid" kept drifting across it. It didn't help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

"Seen anything yet?" Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour's quiet crystal gazing.

"Yeah, there's a burn on this table," said Ron, pointing. "Someone's spilled their candle."

"This is such a waste of time," Hermione hissed. "I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Cheering Charms --"

Professor Trelawney rustled past.

"Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?" she murmured over the clinking of her bangles.

"I don't need help," Ron whispered. "It's obvious what this means. There's going to be loads of fog tonight."

Both Harry and Hermione burst out laughing.

"Now, really!" said Professor Trelawney as everyone's heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking scandalized. "You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!" She approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Harry felt his heart sinking. He was sure he knew what was coming --

"There is something here!" Professor Trelawney whispered, lowering her

face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses.
"Something moving... but what is it?"

Harry was prepared to bet everything he owned, including his Firebolt, that it wasn't good news, whatever it was. And sure enough --

"My dear Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. "It is here, plainer than ever before... my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer... the Gr --"

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" said Hermione loudly. "Not that ridiculous Grim again!"

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione's face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and they both glared at Hermione too. Professor Trelawney stood up, surveying Hermione with unmistakable anger.

"I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane."

There was a moment's silence. Then --

"Fine!" said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming Unfogging the Future back into her bag. "Fine!" she repeated, swinging the bag over her shoulder and almost knocking Ron off his chair. "I give up! I'm leaving!"

And to the whole class's amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder out of sight.

It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Professor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the Grim. She turned abruptly from Harry and Ron's table, breathing rather heavily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

"Ooooo!" said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. "Ooooo, Professor Trelawney, I've just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn't

you? Didn't you, Professor? 'Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!' You said it ages ago, Professor!"

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

"Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have mistaken the Signs.... The Inner Eye can be a burden, you know..."

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table instead.

"Some day Hermione's having, eh?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking awed.

"Yeah..."

Harry glanced into the crystal ball but saw nothing but swirling white mist. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim again? Would he? The last thing he needed was another near-fatal accident, with the Quidditch final drawing ever nearer.

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom seemed close to a nervous collapse, and he wasn't the only one.

"Call this a holiday!" Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. "The exams are ages away, what're they playing at?"

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Divination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She was usually last to leave the common room at night, first to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin's under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak's appeal. When he wasn't doing his own work, he was poring over enormously thick volumes with names like *The Handbook of Hippogriff Psychology and Fowl or Fowl? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality*. He was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks.

Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quidditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions of tactics with Wood. The Gryffindor-Slytherin match would take place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was leading the tournament by exactly two hundred points. This meant (as Wood constantly reminded his team) that they needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden of winning fell largely on Harry, because capturing the Snitch was worth one hundred and fifty points.

"So you must catch it only if we're more than fifty points up," Wood told Harry constantly. "Only if we're more than fifty points up, Harry, or we win the match but lose the Cup. You've got that, Haven't you? You must catch the Snitch only if we're --"

"I KNOW, OLIVER!" Harry yelled.

The whole of Gryffindor House was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn't won the Quidditch Cup since the legendary Charlie Weasley (Ron's second oldest brother) had been seeker. But Harry doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Harry and Malfoy was at its highest point ever. Malfoy was still smarting about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way out of punishment. Harry hadn't forgotten Malfoy's attempt to sabotage him in the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buckbeak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy in front of the entire school.

Never, in anyone's memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays were over, tension between the two teams and their Houses was at the breaking point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor fourth year and a Slytherin sixth year ended up in the hospital wing with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn't walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and trying to trip him up; Crabbe and Goyle kept popping up wherever he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him surrounded by people. Wood had given instructions that Harry should be accompanied everywhere he went, in case the Slytherins tried to put him out of action. The whole

of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that it was impossible for Harry to get to classes on time because he was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he wasn't flying it, he locked it securely in his trunk and frequently dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still there.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had Put down her books.

"I can't work, I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing with the pressure by being louder and more exuberant than ever. Oliver Wood was crouched over a model of a Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with his wand and muttering to himself. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were laughing at Fred's and George's jokes. Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because every time he did, he had the horrible sensation that something very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a Firebolt!" said Ron.

"Yeah..." said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Harry slept badly. First he dreamed that he had overslept, and that Wood was yelling, "Where were you? We had to use Neville instead!" Then he dreamed that Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team arrived for the match riding dragons. He was flying at breakneck speed, trying to avoid a spurt of flames from Malfoy's steed's mouth, when he realized he had forgotten his Firebolt. He fell through the air and woke with a start.

It was a few seconds before Harry remembered that the match hadn't taken place yet, that he was safe in bed, and that the Slytherin team

definitely wouldn't be allowed to play on dragons. He was feeling very thirsty. Quietly as he could, he got out of his four-poster and went to pour himself some water from the silver jug beneath the window.

The grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willow was motionless and innocent-looking. It looked as though the conditions for the match would be perfect.

Harry set down his goblet and was about to turn back to his bed when something caught his eye. An animal of some kind was prowling across the silvery lawn.

Harry dashed to his bedside table, snatched up his glasses, and put them on, then hurried back to the window. It couldn't be the Grim -- not now -- not right before the match -

He peered out at the grounds again and, after a minute's frantic searching, spotted it. It was skirting the edge of the forest now... It wasn't the Grim at all ... it was a cat.... Harry clutched the window ledge in relief as he recognized the bottlebrush tail. It was only Crookshanks....

Or was it only Crookshanks? Harry squinted, pressing his nose flat against the glass. Crookshanks seemed to have come to a halt. Harry was sure he could see something else moving in the shadow of the trees too.

And just then, it emerged -- a gigantic, shaggy black dog, moving stealthily across the lawn, Crookshanks trotting at its side. Harry stared. What did this mean? If Crookshanks could see the dog as well, how could it be an omen of Harry's death?

"Ron!" Harry hissed. "Ron! Wake up!"

"Huh?"

I need you to tell me if you can see something!"

"S'all dark, Harry," Ron muttered thickly. "What're you or, about?"

"Down here --"

Harry looked quickly back out of the window.

Crookshanks and the dog had vanished. Harry climbed onto the windowsill to look right down into the shadows of the castle, but they weren't there. Where had they gone?

A loud snore told him Ron had fallen asleep again.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall the next day to enormous applause. Harry couldn't help grinning broadly as he saw that both the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were applauding them too. The Slytherin table hissed loudly as they passed. Harry noticed that Malfoy looked even paler than usual.

Wood spent the whole of breakfast urging his team to eat, while touching nothing himself. Then he hurried them off to the field before anyone else had finished, so they could get an idea of the conditions. As they left the Great Hall, everyone applauded again.

"Good luck, Harry!" called Cho. Harry felt himself blushing.

"Okay -- no wind to speak of -- sun's a bit bright, that could impair your vision, watch out for it -- ground's fairly hard, good, that'll give us a fast kickoff --"

Wood paced the field, staring around with the team behind him. Finally, they saw the front doors of the castle open in the distance and the rest of the school spilling onto the lawn.

"Locker rooms," said Wood tersely.

None of them spoke as they changed into their scarlet robes. Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was: as though he'd eaten something extremely wiggly for breakfast. In what seemed like no time at all, Wood was saying, "Okay, it's time, let's go --"

They walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Threequarters of the crowd was wearing scarlet rosettes, waving scarlet flags with the

Gryffindor lion upon them, or brandishing banners with slogans like "GO GRYFFINDOR!" and "LIONS FOR THE CUK' Behind the Slytherin goal posts, however, two hundred people were wearing green; the silver serpent of Slytherin glittered on their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very front row, wearing green like everyone else, and a very grim smile.

"And here are the Gryffindors!" yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. "Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spinner, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years --"

Lee's comments were drowned by a tide of "boos" from the Slytherin end.

"And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He's Made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill --"

More boos from the Slytherin crowd. Harry, however, thought Lee had a point. Malfoy was easily the smallest person On the Slytherin team; the rest of them were enormous.

"Captains, shake hands!" said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other's hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other's fingers.

"Mount your brooms!" said Madam Hooch. "Three... two... one..."

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair fly back off his forehead; his nerves left him in the thrill of the flight; he glanced around, saw Malfoy on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinner of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no -- Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing UP the field -- WHAM! -- nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it's caught by -- Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina -- nice swerve around

Montague -- duck, Angelina, that's a Bludger!- SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight

"OUCH!"

Angelina was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

"Sorry!" said Flint as the crowd below booed. "Sorry, didn't see her!"

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater's club at the back of Flint's head. Flint's nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

"That will do!" shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between them. "Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to their Chaser!"

"Come off it, Miss!" howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

"Come on, Alicia!" yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. "YES! SHE'S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched.

"Course, Wood's a superb Keeper!" Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch's whistle. "Superb! Very difficult to pass -- very difficult indeed -- YES! I DON'T BELIEVE IT! HE'S SAVED IT!"

Relieved, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch, but still making sure he caught every word of Lee's commentary. It was essential that he hold Malfoy off the Snitch until Gryffindor was more than fifty points up --

"Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession -- no!

Gryffindor back in possession and it's Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she's streaking up the field -- THAT WAS DELIBERATE!"

Montague, a Slytherin Chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie cart wheeled in the air, managed to stay on her broom, but dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch's whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, Katie had put another penalty past the Slytherin Seeker.

"THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING --"

"Jordan, if you can't commentate in an unbiased way --"

"I'm telling it like it is, Professor!"

Harry felt a huge jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goal posts -- but he mustn't catch it yet -- and if Malfoy saw it -

Faking a look of sudden concentration, Harry pulled his Firebolt around and sped off toward the Slytherin end -- it worked. Malfoy went haring after him, clearly thinking Harry had seen the Snitch there....

WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry's right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again

WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed Harry's elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of Bole and Derrick zooming toward him,

clubs raised --

He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

"Ha haaa!" yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. "Too bad, boys! You'll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebolt And it's Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle -- Flint alongside her -- poke him in the eye, Angelina! -- it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke -- oh no -- Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save --!"

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to tug the magical megaphone away from him.

"Sorry, Professor, sorry! WoiA happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession --"

it was turning into the dirtiest game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, the Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he'd thought she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the face in retaliation. Madam Hooch awarded both teams penalties, and Wood pulled off another spectacular save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it once Gryffindor was fifty points ahead -

Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swooping around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Bole and Derrick took advantage of Fred's and George's absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself

"YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked at Bole and Derrick. "Gryffindor penalty!"

And Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, Fred Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle Out of his hands; Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal -- seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse -- Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught the Snitch now, the Cup was theirs. Harry could almost feel hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game, with Malfoy speeding along behind him.

And then he saw it. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him.

Harry put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears; he stretched out his hand, but suddenly, the Firebolt was slowing down --

Horrified, he looked around. Malfoy had thrown himself forward, grabbed hold of the Firebolt's tail, and was pulling it back.

"You --"

Harry was angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach -- Malfoy was panting with the effort of holding onto the Firebolt, but his eyes were sparkling maliciously. He had achieved what he'd wanted to do -- the Snitch had disappeared again.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics." Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Malfoy was sliding back onto his Nimbus Two Thousand and One.

"YOU CHEATING SCUM!" Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing out of Professor McGonagall's reach. "YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B --"

Professor McGonagall didn't even bother to tell him off. She was actually shaking her finger in Malfoy's direction, her hat had fallen

off, and she too was shouting furiously.

Alicia took Gryffindor's penalty, but she was so angry she missed by several feet. The Gryffindor team was losing concentration and the Slytherins, delighted by Malfoy's foul on Harry, were being spurred on to greater heights.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal -- Montague scores --" Lee groaned. "Seventy- twenty to Gryffindor..."

Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Malfoy anywhere near the Snitch....

"Get out of it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

"Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!"

Harry looked around. Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, including the Slytherin Keeper -- they were all going to block her --

Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet, he shot toward the Slytherins.

"AAAAAAARRRGH!"

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina's Way was clear.

"SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor leads by eighty Points to twenty!"

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

And then he saw something to make his heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face -- there, a few feet above the grass below, was a tiny, golden glimmer -

Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead -

"Go! Go! Go!" Harry urged his broom. He was gaining on Malfoy -- Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Malfoy sent a Bludger at him -- he was at Malfoy's ankles -- he was level --

Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way and --

"YES!"

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, an odd ringing in his ears. The tiny golden ball was held tight in his fist, beating its wings hopelessly against his fingers.

Then Wood was speeding toward him, half-blinded by tears; he seized Harry around the neck and sobbed unrestrainedly into his shoulder. Harry felt two large thumps as Fred and George hit them; then Angelina's, Alicia's, and Katie's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a many-armed hug, the Gryffindor team sank, yelling hoarsely, back to earth.

Wave upon wave of crimson supporters was pouring over the barriers onto the field. Hands were raining down on their backs. Harry had a confused impression of noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he, and the rest of the team, were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. Thrust into the light, he saw Hagrid, Plastered with crimson rosettes -- "Yeh beat 'em, Harry, yeh beat 'em!

Wait till I tell Buckbeak!" There was Percy, jumping up and down like a maniac, all dignity forgotten. Professor McGonagall was sobbing harder even than Wood, wiping her eyes with an enormous Gryffindor flag; and there, fighting their way toward Harry, were Ron and Hermione. Words failed them. They simply beamed as Harry was borne toward the stands, where Dumbledore stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch Cup.

If only there had been a dementor around.... As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have

produced the world's best Patronus.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY'S PREDICTION

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be celebrating; as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry, and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the lake.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating while enticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been spotted working; they were about to take their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests), the highest qualification Hogwarts offered. As Percy hoped to enter the Ministry of Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who disturbed the quiet of the common room in the evenings. In fact, the only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry and Ron had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't restrain themselves when they saw the exam schedule she had drawn up for herself. The first column read:

Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

"Hermione?" Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. "Er -- are you sure you've copied down these times right?"

"What?" snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. "Yes, of course I have."

"Is there any point asking how you're going to sit for two exams at once?" said Harry.

"No," said Hermione shortly. "Have either of you seen my copy of Numerology and Gramatica?"

"Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading," said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of parchment Harry, Ron, and Hermione plenty of opportunity to speak to Hagrid.

"Beaky's gettin' a bit depressed," Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking that Harry's flobberworm was still alive. "Bin cooped up too long. But still... we'll know day after tomorrow -- one way or the other --"

They had Potions that afternoon, which was an unqualified disaster. Try as Harry might, he couldn't get his Confusing Concoction to thicken, and Snape, standing watch with an air of vindictive pleasure, scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a zero onto his notes before moving away.

Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry scribbled everything Florean Fortescue had ever told him about medieval witch-hunts, while wishing he could have had one of Fortescue's choco-nut sundaes with him in the stifling classroom. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the most unusual exam any of them had ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a new boggart.

"Excellent, Harry," Lupin muttered as Harry climbed out of the trunk, grinning. "Full marks."

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Ron and Hermione. Ron did very well until he reached the hinkypunk, which successfully confused him into sinking waist-high into the quagmire. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the boggart in it. After about a minute inside it, she burst out again, screaming.

"Hermione!" said Lupin, startled. "What's the matter?"

"P -- P -- Professor McGonagall!" Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. "Sh -- she said I'd failed everything!"

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, and Ron went back to the castle. Ron was still slightly inclined to laugh at Hermione's boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them on the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of Harry.

"Hello there, Harry!" he said. "Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?"

"Yes," said Harry. Hermione and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the background.

"Lovely day," said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake.

"Pity... pity..."

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

"I'm here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness to the execution of a mad hippogriff. As I needed to visit Hogwarts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in."

"Does that mean the appeal's already happened?" Ron interrupted, stepping forward.

"No, no, it's scheduled for this afternoon," said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

"Then you might not have to witness an execution at A!" said Eon stoutly. "The hippogriff might get off!"

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be withering before their very eyes; the other was tall and strapping, with a thin black mustache. Harry gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, because the very old wizard squinted toward Hagrid's cabin and said in a feeble voice, "Dear, dear, I'm getting too old for this.... Two o'clock, isn't it, Fudge?"

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Harry looked and saw that he was running one broad thumb along the blade of a shining axe. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione nudged him hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

"Why'd you stop me?" said Ron angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Did you see them? They've even got the axe ready! This isn't justice!"

"Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can't go saying things like that to his boss!" said Hermione, but she too looked very upset. "As long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argue, his case properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak...."

But Harry could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying.

All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate their lunch, happily anticipating the end of the exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry's and Ron's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together; Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry and Ron proceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom, trying to cram in a bit of last-minute studying.

"She's seeing us all separately," Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of *Unfogging the Future* open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal gazing. "Have either of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?" he asked them unhappily.

"Nope," said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak's appeal started.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, "What did she ask? Was it okay?"

But they all refused to say.

"She says the crystal ball's told her that if I tell you, I'll have a horrible accident!" squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the ladder toward Harry and Ron, who had now reached the landing.

"That's convenient," snorted Ron. "You know, I'm starting to think Hermione was right about her" -- he jabbed his thumb toward the trapdoor overhead -- "she's a right old fraud."

"Yeah," said Harry, looking at his own watch. It was now two o'clock. "Wish she'd hurry up..."

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

"She says I've got all the makings of a true Seer," she informed Harry

and Ron. "I saw loads of stuff... Well, good luck!"

She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

"Ronald Weasley," said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry was now the only person left to be tested. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his mind across the grounds with Hagrid.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Ron's large feet reappeared on the ladder.

"How'd it go?" Harry asked him, standing up.

"Rubbish," said Ron. "Couldn't see a thing, so I made some stuff up. Don't think she was convinced, though...."

"Meet you in the common room," Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney's voice called, "Harry Potter!"

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent made Harry cough as he stumbled through the clutter of chairs and table to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for him before a large crystal ball.

"Good day, my dear," she said softly. "If you would kindly gaze into the Orb.... Take your time, now... then tell me what you see within it...."

Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared, stared as hard as he could, willing it to show him something other than swirling white fog, but nothing happened.

"Well?" Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. "What do you see?"

The heat was overpowering and his nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside them. He thought of what Ron had just said, and decided to pretend.

"Er --" said Harry, "a dark shape... um..."

"What does it resemble?" whispered Professor Trelawney. "Think, now..."

Harry cast his mind around and it landed on Buckbeak.

"A hippogriff," he said firmly.

"Indeed!" whispered Professor Trelawney, scribbling keenly on the parchment perched upon her knees. "My boy, you may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid's trouble with the Ministry of Magic! Look closer... Does the hippogriff appear to... have its head?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Are you sure?" Professor Trelawney urged him. "Are you quite sure, dear? You don't see it writhing on the ground, perhaps, and a shadowy figure raising an axe behind it?"

"No!" said Harry, starting to feel slightly sick.

"No blood? No weeping Hagrid?"

"No!" said Harry again, wanting more than ever to leave the room and the heat. "It looks fine, it's - - flying away..."

Professor Trelawney sighed.

"Well, dear, I think we'll leave it there.... A little disappointing... but I'm sure you did your best."

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging.

"S -- sorry?" said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. He hesitated, thinking of running to the hospital wing -- and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:

"THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANTS AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT... BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT... WILL SET OU... TO REJOIN... HIS MASTER...."

Professor Trelawney's head fell forward onto her chest. She made a grunting sort of noise. Harry sat there, staring at her. Then, quite suddenly, Professor Trelawney's head snapped up again.

"I'm so sorry, dear boy," she said dreamily, "the heat of the day, you know... I drifted off for a moment...."

Harry sat there, staring at her.

"Is there anything wrong, my dear?"

"You -- you just told me that the -- the Dark Lord's going to rise again... that his servant's going to go back to him.

Professor Trelawney looked thoroughly startled.

"The Dark Lord? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? My dear boy, that's hardly something to joke about.... Rise again, indeed --"

,"But you just said it! You. said the Dark Lord --"

"I think you must have dozed off too, dear!" said Professor Trelawney.

"I would certainly not presume to predict anything quite as far-fetched as that!"

Harry climbed back down the ladder and the spiral staircase, wondering... had he just heard Professor Trelawney make a real prediction? Or had that been her idea of an impressive end to the test?

Five minutes later he was dashing past the security trolls outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Professor Trelawney's words still resounding in his head. People were striding past him in the opposite direction, laughing and joking, heading for the grounds and a bit of long-awaited freedom; by the time he had reached the portrait hole and entered the common room, it was almost deserted. Over in the corner, however, sat Ron and Hermione.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry panted, "just told me --"

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

"Buckbeak lost," said Ron weakly. "Hagrid's just sent this."

Hagrid's note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote that it was hardly legible.

Lost appeal. They're going to execute at sunset. Nothing you can do. Don't come down. I don't want you to see it.

Hagrid

"We've got to go," said Harry at once. "He can't just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!"

"Sunset, though," said Ron, who was staring out the window in a glazed sort of way. "We'd never be allowed... 'specially you, Harry...."

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

"If we only had the Invisibility Cloak...."

"Where is it?" said Hermione.

Harry told her about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

"... if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I'm in serious trouble," he finished.

"That's true," said Hermione, getting to her feet. "If he sees you.... How do you open the witch's hump again?"

"You -- you tap it and say, 'Dissendium,'" said Harry. "But --"

Hermione didn't wait for the rest of his sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and vanished from sight.

"She hasn't gone to get it?" Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery cloak folded carefully under her robes.

"Hermione, I don't know what's gotten into you lately!" said Ron, astounded. "First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out on Professor Trelawney --"

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the cloak hidden down the front of his robes; he had to keep his arms folded to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, listening, until they were sure it was deserted. They heard a last pair of people hurrying across the hall and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

"Okay," she whispered, "no one there -- cloak on --"

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the cloak, then walked down the stone front steps into the grounds. The sun was already sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gilding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid's cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for his visitor, pale-faced and trembling.

"It's us," Harry hissed. "We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly and Harry pulled off the cloak.

Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he was or what to do. This helplessness was worse to watch than tears.

"Wan' some tea?" he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

"Where's Buckbeak, Hagrid?" said Hermione hesitantly.

I -- I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pumpkin patch. Thought he oughta see the trees an' -- an' smell fresh air -- before

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over and starting to clean up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked back hopelessly.

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore --"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared.... Yeh

know what Lucius Malfoy's like... threatened 'em, I expect... an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Malfoy's... but it'll be quick an' clean... an' I'll be beside him.... "

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it -- while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter -- ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore...."

Hermione, who had been rummaging in Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug, let out a small, quickly stifled sob. She straightened up with the new jug in her hands, fighting back tears.

"We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway... If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Harry, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione's face, but she hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. Then, as she picked up the milk bottle to pour some into the jug, she let out a shriek.

"Ron, I don't believe it -- it's Scabbers!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling to get back inside, Scabbers the rat came sliding out onto the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers

looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever, large tufts of hair had fallen out leaving wide bald patches, and he writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself

"It's okay, Scabbers!" said Ron. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

"They're comin'...."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was Albus Dumbledore, his silver beard gleaming in the dying sun. Next to him trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

"Yeh gotta go," said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. "They mustn' find yeh here.... Go now..."

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the cloak. "I'll let yeh out the back way," said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Harry felt strangely unreal, and even more so when he saw Buckbeak a few yards away, tethered to a tree behind Hagrid's Pumpkin patch. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground nervously.

"It's okay, Beaky," said Hagrid softly. "It's okay..." He turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on," he said. "Get goin'."

But they didn't move.

"Hagrid, we can't --"

"We'll tell them what really happened --"

"They can't kill him --"

"Go!" said Hagrid fiercely. "It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the cloak over Harry and Ron, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Hagrid looked at the place where they had just vanished from sight.

"Go quick," he said hoarsely. "Don' listen...."

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid's house. As they reached the other side, the front door closed with a sharp snap.

"Please, let's hurry," Hermione whispered. "I can't stand it, I can't bear it...."

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple-tinged grey, but to the west there was a ruby-red glow.

Ron stopped dead.

"Oh, please, Ron," Hermione began.

"It's Scabbers -- he won't -- stay put --"

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk; squeaking madly, twisting and flailing, trying to sink his teeth into Ron's hand.

"Scabbers, it's me, you idiot, it's Ron," Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men's voices.

"Oh, Ron, please let's move, they're going to do it!" Hermione breathed.

"Okay -- Scabbers, stay put --"

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped again.

"I can't hold him -- Scabbers, shut up, everyone'll hear us --"

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid's garden. There was a jumble of indistinct male voices, a silence, and then, without warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

"They did it!" she whispered to Harry. "I d -- don't believe it -- they did it!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CAT, RAT, AND DOG

Harry's mind had gone blank with shock. The three of them stood transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shadowed grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Harry muttered. Without thinking about what he was doing, he made to turn back, but both Ron and Hermione seized his arms.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him...."

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How -- could -- they?" she choked. "How could they?"

"Come on," said Ron, whose teeth seemed to be chattering.

They set off back toward the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the cloak. The light was fading fast now.

By the time they reached open ground, darkness was settling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden halt, trying to force Scabbers deeper into his pocket. "What's the matter with you, You stupid rat? Stay still -- OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute --"

"He won't -- stay -- put --"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the matter with him?"

But Harry had just seen -- stinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness -- Crookshanks. Whether he could see them or was following the sound of Scabbers's squeaks, Harry couldn't tell.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione moaned. "No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

But the cat was getting nearer --

"Scabbers -- NO!"

Too late -- the rat had slipped between Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, Crookshanks sprang after him, and before Harry or Hermione could stop him, Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

"Ron!" Hermione moaned.

She and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it ""as impossible to run full out under the cloak; they pulled it off and it streamed behind them like a banner as they hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering along ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

"Get away from him -- get away -- Scabbers, come here --"

There was a loud thud.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat --"

Harry and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, but Scabbers was back in his pocket; he had both hands held tight over the quivering lump.

"Ron -- come on back under the cloak --" Hermione panted. "Dumbledore the Minister -- they'll be coming back out in a minute --"

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could even catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of gigantic paws.... Something was bounding toward them, quiet as a shadow -- an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

Harry reached for his wand, but too late -- the dog had made an enormous leap and the front paws hit him on the chest; he keeled over backward in a whirl of hair; he felt its hot breath, saw inch-long teeth -

But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off him. Dazed, feeling as though his ribs were broken, Harry tried to stand up; he could hear it growling as it skidded around for a new attack.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog's jaws fastened instead around Ron's outstretched arm. Harry lunged forward, he seized a handful of the brute's hair, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll --

Then, out of nowhere, something hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet again. He heard Hermione shriek with pain and fall too.

Harry groped for his wand, blinking blood out of his eyes

"Lumos!" he whispered.

The wandlight showed him the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots -- Ron was fighting furiously, but his head and torso were slipping out of sight --

"Ron!" Harry shouted, trying to follow, but a heavy branch whipped lethally through the air and he was forced backward again.

All they could see now was one of Ron's legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him farther underground -- but a horrible crack cut the air like a gunshot; Ron's leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

"Harry -- we've got to go for help --" Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

"No! That thing's big enough to eat him; we haven't got time --"

"Harry -- we're never going to get through without help --"

Another branch whipped down at them, twigs clenched like knuckles.

"If that dog can get in, we can," Harry panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches, but he couldn't get an inch nearer to the tree roots without being in range of the tree's blows.

"Oh, help, help," Hermione whispered frantically, dancing U._ certainly on the spot, "Please..."

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws upon a knot on the trunk.

Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry's arm painfully hard. "How did he know --?"

"He's friends with that dog," said Harry grimly. "I've seen them together. Come on -- and keep your wand out --"

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had slid into it with a flick of his bottlebrush tail. Harry went next; he crawled forward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. Crookshanks was a little way along, his eyes flashing in the light from Harry's wand. Seconds later, Hermione slithered down beside him.

"Where's Ron?" she whispered in a terrified voice.

"This way," said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crookshanks.

"Where does this tunnel come out?" Hermione asked breathlessly from behind him.

"I don't know... It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever gotten into it.... It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade..."

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. On and on went the passage; it felt at least as long as the one to Honeydukes.... All Harry could think of was Ron and what the enormous dog might be doing to him.... He was drawing breath in sharp, painful gasps, running at a crouch....

And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks had gone. Instead, Harry could see a patch of dim light through a small opening.

He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. Both raised their wands to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; every piece of furniture

was broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all boarded up.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded.

Harry pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm again. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows.

"Harry," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry looked around. His eyes fell on a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; one of the legs had been ripped off entirely.

"Ghosts didn't do that," he said slowly.

At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had Moved upstairs. Both of them looked up at the ceiling. Hermione's grip on Harry's arm was so tight he was losing feeling in his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded again and let go.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and UP the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the floor, where a wide shiny stripe had been made by something being dragged upstairs.

They reached the dark landing.

"Nox," they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they crept toward it, they heard movement from behind it; a low moan, and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod.

Wand held tightly before him, Harry kicked the door wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor beside him, clutching his leg, which stuck out at a strange angle, was Ron.

Harry and Hermione dashed across to him.

"Ron -- are you okay?"

"Where's the dog?"

"Not a dog," Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. "Harry, it's a trap --"

"What --"

"He's the dog... he's an Animagus."

Ron was staring over Harry's shoulder. Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black.

"Expelliarmus!" he croaked, pointing Ron's wand at them.

Harry's and Hermione's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said hoarsely.

His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of using it. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you) not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful... it will make everything much easier...."

The taunt about his father rang in Harry's ears as though Black had bellowed it. A boiling hate erupted in Harry's chest, leaving no place for fear. For the first time in his life, he wanted his wand back in his hand, not to defend himself, but to attack... to kill. Without knowing

what he was doing, he started forward, but there was a sudden movement on either side of him and two pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back.... "No, Harry!" Hermione gasped in a petrified whisper; Ron, however, spoke to Black.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes.

"Lie down," he said quietly to Ron. "You will damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

"There'll be only one murder here tonight," said Black, and his grin widened.

"Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free of Ron, and Hermione. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew... What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

"Harry!" Hermione whimpered. "Be quiet!"

"HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!" Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione's and Ron's restraint and lunged forward -

He had forgotten about magic -- he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, full-grown man -- all Harry knew was that he wanted to hurt Black as badly as he could and that he didn't care how much he got hurt in return --

Perhaps it was the shock of Harry doing something so stupid, but Black didn't raise the wands in time -- one of Harry's hands fastened over his wasted wrist, forcing the wand tips away; the knuckles of Harry's other hand collided with the side of Black's head and they fell, backward, into the wall -

Hermione was screaming; Ron was yelling; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black's hand sent a jet of sparks into the air that missed Harry's face by inches; Harry felt the shrunken arm under his fingers twisting madly, but he clung on, his other hand punching every part of Black it could find.

But Black's free hand had found Harry's throat

"No," he hissed, "I've waited too long --"

The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew.

Then he saw Hermione's foot swing out of nowhere. Black let go of Harry with a grunt of pain; Ron had thrown himself on Black's wand hand and Harry heard a faint clatter --

He fought free of the tangle of bodies and saw his own wand rolling across the floor; he threw himself toward it but

"Argh!"

Crookshanks had joined the fray; both sets of front claws had sunk themselves deep into Harry's arm; Harry threw him off, but Crookshanks now darted toward Harry's wand --

"NO YOU DON'T!" roared Harry, and he aimed a kick at Crookshanks that made the cat leap aside, spitting; Harry snatched up his wand and turned

-

"Get out of the way!" he shouted at Ron and Hermione.

They didn't need telling twice. Hermione, gasping for breath, her lip bleeding, scrambled aside, snatching up her and Ron's wands. Ron crawled to the four-poster and collapsed onto it, panting, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly nearer, his wand pointing straight at Black's heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking down at him. A livid bruise was rising around Black's left eye and his nose was bleeding.

"You killed my parents," said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

"I don't deny it," he said very quietly. "But if you knew the whole story."

"The whole story?" Harry repeated, a furious pounding in his ears. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know."

"You've got to listen to me," Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't.... You don't understand...."

"I understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? My mum... trying to stop Voldemort killing me... and you did that... you did it...."

Before either of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black's chest and settled himself there, right over Black's heart. Black blinked and looked down at the cat.

"Get off," he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black's robes and wouldn't shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and looked up at him with those great yellow eyes. To his right, Hermione gave a dry sob.

Harry stared down at Black and Crookshanks, his grip tightening on the wand. So what if he had to kill the cat too? It was in league with Black.... If it was prepared to die, trying to protect Black, that

wasn't Harry's business.... If Black wanted to save it, that only proved he cared more for Crookshanks than for Harry's parents....

Harry raised the wand. Now was the moment to do it. Now was the moment to avenge his mother and father. He was going to kill Black. He had to kill Black. This was his chance....

The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his chest. Ron's ragged breathing came from near the bed; Hermione was quite silent.

And then came a new sound -

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor -- someone was moving downstairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" Hermione screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE -- SIRIUS BLACK - QUICK!"

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crookshanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively -- Do it now! said a voice in his head -- but the footsteps were thundering up the stairs and Harry still hadn't done it.

The door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks and Harry wheeled around as Professor Lupin came hurtling into the room, his face bloodless, his wand raised and ready. His eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Black, and then to Black himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry's feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Lupin shouted.

Harry's wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the two Hermione was holding. Lupin caught them all deftly, then moved into the room, staring at Black, who still had Crookshanks lying protectively across his chest.

Harry stood there, feeling suddenly empty. He hadn't done it. His nerve had failed him. Black was going to be handed back to the dementors.

Then Lupin spoke, in a very tense voice.

"Where is he, Sirius?"

Harry looked quickly at Lupin. He didn't understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? He turned to look at Black again.

Black's face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn't move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand and pointed straight at Ron. Mystified, Harry glanced around at Ron, who looked bewildered.

"But then..." Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, "... why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless" -- Lupin's eyes suddenly widened, as though he was seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see, "-- unless he was the one... unless you switched... without telling me?"

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin's face, Black nodded.

"Professor," Harry interrupted loudly, "what's going on --?"

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin was lowering his wand, gazing fixed at Black. The Professor walked to Black's side, seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

"DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione screamed.

Lupin let go of Black and turned to her. She had raised herself off the floor and was pointing at Lupin, wild-eyed. "You -- you --"

"Hermione --"

"-- you and him!"

"Hermione, calm down --"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you --"

"Hermione, listen to me, please!" Lupin shouted. "I can explain --"

Harry could feel himself shaking, not with fear, but with a fresh wave of fury.

"I trusted you," he shouted at Lupin, his voice wavering, out of control, "and all the time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," said Lupin. "I haven't been Sirius's friend, but I am now -- Let me explain...."

"NO!" Hermione screamed. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too -- he's a werewolf!"

There was a ringing silence. Everyone's eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don't want Harry dead. An odd shiver passed over his face. "But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped, "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, "How long have you known?"

"Ages," Hermione whispered. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay..."

"He'll be delighted," said Lupin coolly. "He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms meant.... Did you check the lunar chart and realize that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," Hermione whispered. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are!"

"But they already know," said Lupin. "At least, the staff do."

"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf. Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy --"

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry yelled. "YOUVE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!"

He was pointing at Black, who suddenly crossed to the four-poster bed and sank onto it, his face hidden in one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both of them, dragging his leg.

"I have not been helping Sirius," said Lupin. "If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look --"

He separated Harry's, Ron's and Hermione's wands and threw each back to its owner; Harry caught his, stunned.

There, said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt "You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?"

Harry didn't know what to think. Was it a trick?

"If you haven't been helping him," he said, with a furious glance at Black, "how did you know he was here?"

"The map," said Lupin. "The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it --"

"You know how to work it?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Of course I know how to work it," said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. "I helped write it. I'm Moony -- that was my friends' nickname for me at school."

"You wrote --?"

"The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I"

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

"You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Harry--"

"How d'you know about the cloak?"

"The number of times I saw James disappearing under it...", said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. "The point is, even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else."

"What?" said Harry. "No, we weren't!"

I couldn't believe my eyes," said Lupin, still pacing, and ignoring Harry's interruption. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?" "No one was with us!" said Harry.

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black.... I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow --"

"One of us!" Ron said angrily.

"No, Ron," said Lupin. "Two of you."

He had stopped his pacing, his eyes moving over Ron.

"Do you think I could have a look at the rat?" he said evenly.

"What?" said Ron. "What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Lupin. "Could I see him, please?"

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long bald tail to stop him escaping. Crookshanks stood up on Black's leg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin moved closer to Ron. He seemed to be holding his breath as he gazed intently at Scabbers.

"What?" Ron said again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

"What d'you mean -- of course he's a rat --"

"No, he's not," said Lupin quietly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said Black, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MOONY, WORMTAIL, PADDFOOT, AND PRONGS

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Harry was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead!" said Harry. "He killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched convulsively.

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me... not this time, though!"

And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on his broken leg.

."Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled, launching himself forwards and dragging Black away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that -- they need to understand -- we've got to explain --"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin off. One hand was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Scabbers, who was squealing like a piglet, scratching Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've -- got -- a -- right -- to -- know -- -everything!" Lupin panted, still trying to restrain Black. "Ron's kept him as a pet! There are parts of it even I don't understand, and Harry -- you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's bitten, scratched, and bleeding hands.

"All right, then," Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat.

"Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for..."

"You're nutters, both of you," said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry and Hermione for support. "I've had enough of this. I'm off."

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

"You're going to hear me out, Ron," he said quietly. "Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen."

"HE'S NOT PETER, HE'S SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, trying to fore the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting to hard; Ron swayed and overbalanced, and Harry caught him am pushed him back down to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die," he said. "A whole street full of them..."

"They didn't see what they thought they saw!" said Black savagely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron's hands.

"Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter," said Lupin, nodding. "I believed it myself -- until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder's map never lies... Peter's alive. Ron's holding him, Harry."

Harry looked down at Ron, and as their eyes met, they agreed, silently: Black and Lupin were both out of their minds. Their story made no sense whatsoever. How could Scabbers be Peter Pettigrew? Azkaban must have unhinged Black after all -- but why was Lupin playing along with him?

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sensibly.

"But Professor Lupin... Scabbers can't be Pettigrew... it just can't be true, you know it can't..."

"Why can't it be true?" Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in an experiment with grindylows.

"Because... because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework -- the Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things... and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list."

Harry had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to laugh.

"Light again, Hermione!" he said. "But the Ministry never knew that here used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts."

"I you're going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus," said Black, who was still watching Scabbers's every desperate move. "I've waited twelve years, I'm not going to wait much longer."

"All right... but you'll need to help me, Sirius," said Lupin, I only know how it began..."

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. The bedroom door had opened of its own accord. All five of them stared at it. Then Lupin strode toward it and looked out into the landing.

"No one there..."

"This place is haunted!" said Ron.

"It's not," said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. "The Shrieking Shack was never haunted.... The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me."

He pushed his graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a moment then said, "That's where all of this starts -- with my becoming a werewolf, None of this could have happened if I hadn't been bitter... and if I hadn't been so foolhardy..."

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Hermione, said, "Shh!" She was watching Lupin very intently.

"I as a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making for me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week, preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform.... I'm able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again.

"Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I became a fully fledged monster once a month. It seemed impossible that I would be able to come to Hogwarts. Other parents weren't likely to want their children exposed to me.

"But then Dumbledore became Headmaster, and he was sympathetic. He said that as long as we took certain precautions, there was no reason I shouldn't come to school..." Lupin sighed, and looked directly at Harry. "I told you, months ago, that the Whomping Willow was planted the year I came to Hogwarts. The truth is that it was planted because I came to Hogwarts. This house" -- Lupin looked miserably around the room, -- "the tunnel that leads to it -- they were built for my use. Once a month, I was smuggled out of the castle, into this place, to transform. The tree was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous."

Harry couldn't see where this story was going, but he was listening raptly all the same. The only sound apart from Lupin's voice was Scabbers's frightened squeaking.

"My transformations in those days were -- were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead. The villagers heard the noise and the screaming and thought they were hearing particularly violent spirits. Dumbledore encouraged the rumor.... Even now, when the house has been silent for years, the villagers don't dare approach it...."

"But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black... Peter Pettigrew... and, of course, your father, Harry -- James Potter."

"Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I disappeared once a month. I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her... I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they, like you, Hermione, worked out the truth...."

"And they didn't desert me at all. Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times

of my life. They became Animagi."

"My dad too?" said Harry, astounded.

"Yes, indeed," said Lupin. "It took them the best part of three years to work out how to do it. Your father and Sirius here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong -- one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will."

"But how did that help you?" said Hermione, sounding puzzled.

"They couldn't keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals," said Lupin. "A werewolf is only a danger to people. They sneaked out of the castle every month under James's Invisibility Cloak. They transformed... Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow's attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind seemed to become less so while I was with them."

"Hurry up, Remus," snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

"I'm getting there, Sirius, I'm getting there... well, highly exciting possibilities were open to us now that we could all transform. Soon we were leaving the Shrieking Shack and roaming the school grounds and the village by night. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check. I doubt whether any Hogwarts students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did.... And that's how we came to write the Marauder's Map, and sign it with our nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs."

"What sort of animal --?" Harry began, but Hermione cut him off.

"That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you'd given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?"

"A thought that still haunts me," said Lupin heavily. "And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless -- carried away with our own cleverness."

I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore's trust, of course... he had admitted me to Hogwarts when no other headmaster would have done so, and he had no idea I was breaking the rules he had set down for my own and others' safety. He never knew I had led three fellow students into becoming Animagi illegally. But I always managed to forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And I haven't changed..."

Lupin's face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice. "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admitting that I'd led others along with me... and Dumbledore's trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had nothing to do with it... so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

"Snape?" said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers; for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius," said Lupin heavily. "He's teaching here as well." He looked up at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore a year that I am not to be trusted. He has his reasons... you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me --"

Black made a derisive noise.

"It served him right," he sneered. "Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to... hoping he could get us expelled...."

"Severus was very interested in where I went every month." Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "We were in the same year, you know, and we -- er -- didn't like each other very much. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch field... anyway Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be -- er -- amusing, to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it -- if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf -- but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life... Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was...."

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing, directly at Lupin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SERVANT OF LORD VOLDEMORT

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Harry felt as though he'd received a huge electric shock.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep this wand pointing directly at Lupin's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you...."

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said,

his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did... lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus --" Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout --"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Lupin urgently. "You haven't heard everything -- I can explain -- Sirius is not here to kill Harry --"

"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this.... He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin... a tame werewolf --"

"You fool," said Lupin softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Lupin's mouth, wrists, and ankles; he overbalanced and fell to the floor, unable to move. With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black's eyes.

"Give me a reason," he whispered. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Harry stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. He glanced around at Ron and Hermione. Ron looked just as confused as he did, still fighting to keep hold on the struggling Scabbers. Hermione,

however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice, "Professor Snape -- it it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w -- would it?"

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school," Snape spat. "You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue."

"But if -- if there was a mistake --"

"KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Black's face. Hermione fell silent.

"Vengeance is very sweet," Snape breathed at Black. "How I hoped I would be the one to catch you...."

"The joke's on you again, Severus," Black snarled. "As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle" -- he jerked his head at Ron -- "I'll come quietly...."

"Up to the castle?" said Snape silkily. "I don't think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get out of the Willow. They'll be very pleased to see you, Black... pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay... I --"

What little color there was in Blacks face left it.

"You -you've got to hear me out," he croaked. "The rat -- look at the rat --"

But there was a mad glint in Snape's eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

"Come on, all of you," he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Lupin flew to his hands. "I'll drag the werewolf. Perhaps the dementors will have a kiss for him too --"

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

"Get out of the way, Potter, you're in enough trouble already," snarled Snape. "If I hadn't been here to save your skin --"

"Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year," Harry said. "I've been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn't he just finish me off then?"

"Don't ask me to fathom the way a werewolf's mind works," hissed Snape. "Get out of the way, Potter."

"YOU'RE PATHETIC!" Harry yelled. "JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN --"

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. "Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black -- now get out of the way, or I will make you. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" he yelled -- except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black, looking at Harry.

"You should have left him to me...."

Harry avoided Black's eyes. He wasn't sure, even now, that he'd done the right thing.

"We attacked a teacher... We attacked a teacher..." Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. "Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble --"

Lupin was struggling against his bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied him. Lupin straightened up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," he told Lupin.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Lupin. "You, boy -- give me Peter, please. Now."

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it," he said weakly. "Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean..." He looked up at Harry and Hermione for support, "Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat -- there are millions of rats -- how's he supposed to know which one he's after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question," said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly. "How did you find out where he was?"

Black put one of his clawlike hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to show the others.

It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there, on Ron's shoulder, was Scabbers.

"How did you get this?" Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

"Fudge," said Black. "When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page on this boy's shoulder... I knew him at once... how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts... to where Harry was..."

"My God," said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw..."

"What about it?" said Ron defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," said Black.

"Of course," Lupin breathed. "So simple... so brilliant... he cut it off himself?"

"Just before he transformed," said Black. "When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself -- and sped down into the sewer with the other rats...."

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" said Lupin. "The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger."

"Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right --"

"Twelve years, in fact," said Lupin. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We -- we've been taking good care of him!" said Ron.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" said Lupin. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again...."

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

But that wasn't right, Harry thought suddenly... Scabbers had been looking ill before he met Crookshanks... ever since Ron's return from Egypt... since the time when Black had escaped....

"This cat isn't mad," said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks's fluffy head. "He's the most intelligent of his kind I've ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me.... Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he's been helping me. .. "What do you mean?" breathed Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't... so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me.... As I understand it, he took them from a boy's bedside table...."

Harry's brain seemed to be sagging under the weight of what he was hearing. It was absurd... and yet...

"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it." croaked Black. "This cat -- Crookshanks, did you call him? -- told me Peter had left blood on the sheets.... I supposed he bit himself... Well, faking his own death had worked once."

These words jolted Harry to his senses.

"And why did he fake his death?" he said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No," said Lupin, "Harry--"

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

"Then I should've let Snape take you!" Harry shouted.

"Harry," said Lupin hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've

thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down -- but it was the other way around, don't you see? Peter betrayed your mother and father -- Sirius tracked Peter down --"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

He was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly over bright.

"Harry... I as good as killed them," he croaked. "I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me.... I'm to blame, I know it.... The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he'd gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies... I realized what Peter must've done... what I'd done...."

His voice broke. He turned away.

"Enough of this," said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Harry had never heard before. "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron asked Lupin tensely.

"Force him to show himself," said Lupin. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head. "Ready, Sirius?" said Lupin.

Black had already retrieved Snape's wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

"Together?" he said quietly.

"I think so,,," said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. "On the count of three. One -- two -- THREE!"

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray form twisting madly -- Ron yelled -- the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then --

It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up.

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose and his very small, watery eyes. He looked around at them all, his breathing fast and shallow. Harry saw his eyes dart to the door and back again.

"Well, hello, Peter," said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see.

"S -- Sirius... R -- Remus..." Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. "My friends... my old friends..."

Black's wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning look, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed --"

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, and Harry could see beads of sweat breaking

out over his pasty face, "you don't believe him, do you...? He tried to kill me, Remus...."

"So we've heard," said Lupin, more coldly. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'll be so --"

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Black, and Harry saw that he used his middle finger, because his index was missing. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to kill me too.... You've got to help me, Remus...."

Black's face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," said Lupin.

"Sorted things out?" squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again' the only door. "I knew he'd come after me! I knew he'd be back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" said Lupin, his brow furrowed. "When nobody has ever done it before?"

"He's got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Pettigrew shouted shrilly. "How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!"

Black started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

"Voldemort, teach me tricks?" he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

"What, scared to hear your old master's name?" said Black. "I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with you, are they?"

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius --" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing

faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

"You haven't been hiding from me for twelve years," said Black. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter... They all think you're dead, or you'd have to answer to them.... I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters' on your information... and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways.

If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter --"

"Don't know... what you're talking about...," said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Lupin. "You don't believe this -- this madness, Remus --"

"I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat," said Lupin evenly.

"Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban -- the spy, Sirius Black!"

Black's face contorted.

"How dare you," he growled, sounding suddenly like the bearsized dog he had been. I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter -- I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us... me and Remus... and James....

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

"Me, a spy... must be out of your mind... never... don't know how you can say such a --"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it,"

Black hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step backward. "I thought it was the perfect plan... a bluff... Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you.... It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Harry caught words like "far-fetched" and "lunacy," but he couldn't help paying more attention to the ashen color of Pettigrew's face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

"Professor Lupin?" said Hermione timidly. "Can -- can I say something?"

"Certainly, Hermione," said Lupin courteously.

"Well -- Scabbers -- I mean, this -- this man -- he's been sleeping in Harry's dormitory for three years. If he's working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?"

"There!" said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. "Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry's head! Why should I?"

"I'll tell you why," said Black. "Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort's been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he's half dead. You weren't about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore's nose, for a wreck of a wizard who'd lost all of his power, were you? You'd want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn't you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren't YOU, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him...."

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er -- Mr. Black -- Sirius?" said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her.

"If you don't mind me asking, how -- how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I --"

But Lupin silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't suck it out of me... but it kept me sane and knowing who I am... helped me keep my powers... so when it all became ... too much... I could transform in my cell... become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know...." He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions.... They could tell that my feelings were less -- less human, less complex when I was a dog... but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand...."

"But then I saw Peter in that picture... I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry... perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again...."

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"... ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies... and to deliver the last Potter to them. if he gave them Harry, who'd dare say he'd betrayed Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors...."

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive...."

Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley. "The guards say he's been talking in his sleep... always the same words... 'He's at Hogwarts.'"

"It was as if someone had lit a fire In my head, and the dementors couldn't destroy it.... It wasn't a happy feeling... it was an obsession... but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog.... It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused.... I was thin, very thin... thin enough to slip through the bars.... I swam as a dog back to the mainland.... I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry...."

He looked at Harry, who did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

And at long last, Harry believed him. Throat too tight to speak, he nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

"Sirius -- it's me... it's Peter... your friend... you wouldn't --"

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?"

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Lupin. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over Pettigrew's head.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Black.

"Not at all, Padfoot, old friend," said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. "And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing you were the spy?"

"Of course," said Black, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. "Shall we kill him together?"

"Yes, I think so," said Lupin grimly.

"You wouldn't... you won't...," gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

"Ron... haven't I been a good friend... a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you... you're on my side, aren't you.

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

"I let you sleep in my bed!" he said.

"Kind boy... kind master..." Pettigrew crawled toward Ron "You won't let them do it.... I was your rat.... I was a good pet...."

"If you made a better rat than a human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," said Black harshly. Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Pettigrew's reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione's robes.

"Sweet girl... clever girl... you -- you won't let them.... Help me...."

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew's clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry.

"Harry... Harry... you look just like your father... just like him...."

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?" roared Black. "HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?"

"Harry," whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands outstretched. "Harry, James wouldn't have wanted me killed.... James would have understood, Harry... he would have shown me mercy..."

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew's shoulders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat there, twitching with terror, staring up at them.

"You sold Lily and James to Voldemort," said Black, who was shaking too. "Do you deny it?"

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

"Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord... you have no idea... he has weapons you can't imagine.... I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen.... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me --"

"DON'T LIE!" bellowed Black. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!"

"He -- he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "Wh -- what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?" said Black, with a terrible fury in his face. "Only innocent lives, Peter!"

"You don't understand!" whined Pettigrew. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Black. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

"You should have realized," said Lupin quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter."

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

"NO!" Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front Pettigrew, facing the wands. "You can't kill him," he said breathlessly. "You can't."

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

"Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents," Black snarled. "This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family."

"I know," Harry panted. "We'll take him up to the castle. We'll hand him over to the dementors... He can go to Azkaban... but don't kill him."

"Harry!" gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry's knees. "You -- thank you -- it's more than I deserve -- thank you --"

"Get off me," Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew's hands off him in disgust. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because -- I don't reckon my dad would've wanted them to become killers -- just for you."

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin were looking at each other. Then, with one movement, they lowered their wands.

"You're the only person who has the right to decide, Harry," said Black. "But think... think what he did...."

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does...."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Lupin. "Stand aside, Harry."

Harry hesitated.

"I'm going to tie him up," said Lupin. "That's all, I swear."

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we will kill you. You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "Ferula." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Lupin helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little -- overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er -- perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safely back in the castle. We can take him like this...."

He muttered, "Mobilicorpus." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few

inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Lupin.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy manacles from thin air; soon Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin's right, right arm to Ron's left. Ron's face was set. He seemed to have taken Scabbers's true identity as a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jauntily high.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DEMENTOR'S KISS

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius. Harry and Hermione brought up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had Pettigrew covered with his wand. Harry could see them edging awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Harry went right after Black, who was still making Snape drift along ahead of them; he kept bumping his lolling head on the low ceiling. Harry had the impression Black was making no effort to prevent this.

"You know what this means?" Black said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. "Turning Pettigrew in?"

"You're free," said Harry.

"Yes...", said Black. "But I'm also -- I don't know if anyone ever told you -- I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Harry.

"Well... your parents appointed me your guardian," said Black stiffly. "If anything happened to them..."

Harry waited. Did Black mean what he thought he meant?

"I'll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle," said Black. "But... well... think about it. Once my name's cleared... if you wanted a... a different home..."

Some sort of explosion took place in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"What -- live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Black quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd --"

"Are you insane?" said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Black's.

"Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?"

Black turned right around to look at him; Snape's head was scraping the ceiling but Black didn't seem to care.

"You want to?" he said. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it!" said Harry.

Black's gaunt face broke into the first true smile Harry had seen upon it. The difference it made was startling, as though a person ten years younger were shining through the starved mask; for a moment, he was recognizable as the man who had laughed at Harry's parents' wedding.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel.

Crookshanks darted up first; he had evidently pressed his paw to the knot on the trunk, because Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Black saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry and Hermione to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Pettigrew was still wheezing and occasionally whimpering. Harry's mind was buzzing. He was going to leave the Dursleys. He was going to live with Sirius Black, his parents' best friend.... He felt dazed.... What would happen when he told the Dursleys he was going to live with the convict they'd seen on television... !

"One wrong move, Peter," said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew's chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead of Black, his chin bumping on his chest. And then -

A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Black froze. He flung out one arm to make Harry and Hermione stop.

Harry could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my --" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Black whispered. "Run. Now."

But Harry couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. He leapt forward but Black caught him around the chest and threw him back.

"Leave it to me -- RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away --

As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disappeared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous, bearlike dog bounded forward. As the werewolf wrenched itself free of the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew. They were locked, jaw to jaw, claws ripping at each other.

Harry stood, transfixed by the sight, too intent upon the battle to notice anything else. It was Hermione's scream that alerted him --

Pettigrew had dived for Lupin's dropped wand. Ron, unsteady on his bandaged leg, fell. There was a bang, a burst of light -- and Ron lay motionless on the ground. Another bang -- Crookshanks flew into the air and back to the earth in a heap.

"Expelliarmus." Harry yelled, pointing his own wand at Pettigrew; Lupin's wand flew high into the air and out of sight. "Stay where you are!" Harry shouted, running forward.

Too late. Pettigrew had transformed. Harry saw his bald tail whip through the manacle on Ron's outstretched arm and heard a scurrying through the grass.

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Harry turned to see the werewolf taking flight; it was galloping into the forest --

"Sirius, he's gone, Pettigrew transformed!" Harry yelled.

Black was bleeding; there were gashes across his muzzle and back, but at Harry's words he scrambled up again, and in an instant, the sound of his paws faded to silence as he pounded away across the grounds.

Harry and Hermione dashed over to Ron.

"What did he do to him?" Hermione whispered. Ron's eyes were only

half-closed, his mouth hung open; he was definitely alive, they could hear him breathing, but he didn't seem to recognize them.

"I don't know...."

Harry looked desperately around. Black and Lupin both gone... they had no one but Snape for company, still hanging, unconscious, in midair.

"We'd better get them up to the castle and tell someone," said Harry, pushing his hair out of his eyes, trying to think straight. "Come --"

But then, from beyond the range of their vision, they heard a yelping, a whining: a dog in pain....

"Sirius," Harry muttered, staring into the darkness.

He had a moment's indecision, but there was nothing they could do for Ron at the moment, and by the sound of it, Black was in trouble --

Harry set off at a run, Hermione right behind him. The yelping seemed to be coming from the ground near the edge of the lake. They pelted toward it, and Harry, running flat out, felt the cold without realizing what it must mean -

The yelping stopped abruptly. As they reached the lakeshore, they saw why -- Sirius had turned back into a man. He was crouched on all fours, his hands over his head.

'Nooo," he moaned. 'Nooo... please...."

And then Harry saw them. Dementors, at least a hundred of them, gliding in a black mass around the lake toward them. He spun around, the familiar, icy cold penetrating his insides, fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the darkness on every side; they were encircling them....

"Herrnionne, think of something happy!" Harry yelled, raising his wand, blinking furiously to try and clear his vision, shaking his head to rid it of the faint screaming that had started inside it --

I'm going to live with my godfather. I'm leaving the Dursleys.

He forced himself to think of Black, and only Black, and began to chant:
"Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!"

Black gave a shudder, rolled over, and lay motionless on the ground, pale as death.

He'll be all right. I'm going to go and live with him.

"Expecto patronum! Hermione, help me! Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto --" Hermione whispered, "expecto -- expecto --"

But she couldn't do it. The dementors were closing in, barely ten feet from them. They formed a solid wall around Harry and Hermione, and were getting closer....

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, trying to blot the screaming from his ears. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment, Harry felt Hermione collapse next to him. He was alone... completely alone....

"Expecto -- expecto patronum --"

Harry felt his knees hit the cold grass. Fog was clouding his eyes. With a huge effort, he fought to remember -- Sirius was innocent -- innocent -- We'll be okay -- I'm going to live with him --

"Expecto patronum!" he gasped.

By the feeble light of his formless Patronus, He saw a dementor halt, very close to him. It couldn't walk through the cloud of silver mist Harry had conjured. A dead, slimy hand slid out from under the cloak. It made a gesture as though to sweep the Patronus aside.

"No -- no --" Harry gasped. "He's innocent... expecto expecto patronum --"

He could feel them watching him, hear their rattling breath like an evil wind around him. The nearest dementor seemed to be considering him. Then it raised both its rotting hands -- and lowered its hood.

Where there should have been eyes, there was only thin, gray scabbed skin, stretched blankly over empty sockets. But there was a mouth... a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death rattle.

A paralyzing terror filled Harry so that he couldn't move or speak. His Patronus flickered and died.

White fog was blinding him. He had to fight... *expecto patronum* ... he couldn't see... and in the distance, he heard the familiar screaming... *expecto patronum*... he groped in the mist for Sirius, and found his arm... they weren't going to take him....

But a pair of strong, clammy hands suddenly attached themselves around Harry's neck. They were forcing his face upward.... He could feel its breath.... It was going to get rid of him first.... He could feel its putrid breath.... His mother was screaming in his ears.... She was going to be the last thing he ever heard --

And then, through the fog that was drowning him, he thought he saw a silvery light growing brighter and brighter... He felt himself fall forward onto the grass.... Facedown, too weak to move, sick and shaking, Harry opened his eyes. The dementor must have released him. The blinding light was illuminating the grass around him.... The screaming had stopped, the cold was ebbing away...

Something was driving the dementors back.... It was circling around him and Black and Hermione.... They were leaving....

The air was warm again....

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry raised his head a few inches and saw an animal amid the light, galloping away across the lake.... Eyes blurred with sweat, Harry tried to make out what it was.... It was as bright as a unicorn.... Fighting to stay conscious,

Harry watched it canter to a halt as it reached the opposite shore. For a moment, Harry saw, by its brightness, somebody welcoming it back... raising his hand to pat it... someone who looked strangely familiar ... but it couldn't be...

Harry didn't understand. He couldn't think anymore. He felt the last of his strength leave him, and his head hit the ground as he fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HERMIONE'S SECRET

Shocking business... shocking... miracle none of them died... never heard the like... by thunder, it was lucky you were there, Snape...."

"Thank you, Minister."

"Order of Merlin, Second Class, I'd say. First Class, if I can wangle it!"

"Thank you very much indeed, Minister."

"Nasty cut you've got there.... Black's work, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minister...."

"No!"

"Black had bewitched them, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior. They seemed to think there was a possibility he was innocent. They weren't responsible for their actions. On the other hand, their interference might have permitted Black to escape.... They obviously thought they were going to catch Black single-handed. They've got away with a great deal before now... I'm afraid it's given them a rather high opinion of themselves... and of course Potter has always been allowed an extraordinary amount of license by the headmaster --"

"Ah, well, Snape... Harry Potter, you know... we've all got a bit of a blind spot where he's concerned."

"And yet -- is it good for him to be given so much special treatment? Personally, I try and treat him like any other student. And any other student would be suspended -- at the very least -- for leading his friends into such danger. Consider, Minister -- against all school rules -- after all the precautions put in place for his protection -- out-of-bounds, at night, consorting with a werewolf and a murderer -- and I have reason to believe he has been visiting Hogsmeade illegally too --"

"Well, well... we shall see, Snape, we shall see.... The boy has undoubtedly been foolish...."

Harry lay listening with his eyes tight shut. He felt very groggy. The words he was hearing seemed to be traveling very slowly from his ears to his brain, so that it was difficult to understand.... His limbs felt like lead; his eyelids too heavy to lift.... He wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed, forever....

"What amazes me most is the behavior of the dementors... you've really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?"

"No, Minister... by the time I had come 'round they were heading back to their positions at the entrances...."

"Extraordinary. And yet Black, and Harry, and the girl --"

"All unconscious by the time I reached them. I bound and gagged Black, naturally, conjured stretchers, and brought them all straight back to the castle."

There was a pause. Harry's brain seemed to be moving a little faster, and as it did, a gnawing sensation grew in the pit of his stomach....

He opened his eyes.

Everything was slightly blurred. Somebody had removed his glasses. He was lying in the dark hospital wing. At the very end of the ward, he could make out Madam Pomfrey with her back to him, bending over a bed. Harry squinted. Ron's red hair was visible beneath Madam Pomfrey's arm.

Harry moved his head over on the pillow. In the bed to his right lay Hermione. Moonlight was falling across her bed. Her eyes were open too. She looked petrified, and when she saw that Harry was awake, pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the hospital wing door. It was ajar, and the voices of Cornelius Fudge and Snape were coming through it from the corridor outside.

Madam Pomfrey now came walking briskly up the dark ward to Harry's bed. He turned to look at her. She was carrying the largest block of chocolate he had ever seen in his life. It looked like a small boulder.

"Ah, you're awake!" she said briskly. She placed the chocolate on Harry's bedside table and began breaking it apart with a small hammer.

"How's Ron?" said Harry and Hermione together.

"He'll live, said Madam Pomfrey grimly. "As for you two you'll be staying here until I'm satisfied you're -- Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry was sitting up, putting his glasses back on, and picking up his wand.

"I need to see the headmaster," he said.

"Potter," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly, "it's all right. They've got Black. He's locked away upstairs. The dementors will be performing the kiss any moment now --"

"WHAT?"

Harry jumped up out of bed; Hermione had done the same. But his shout had been heard in the corridor outside; next second, Cornelius Fudge and Snape had entered the ward.

"Harry, Harry, what's this?" said Fudge, looking agitated. "You should be in bed -- has he had any chocolate?" he asked Madam Pomfrey anxiously.

"Minister, listen!" Harry said. "Sirius Black's innocent! Peter

Pettigrew faked his own death! We saw him tonight! You can't let the dementors do that thing to Sirius, he's --"

But Fudge was shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

"Harry, Harry, you're very confused, you've been through a dreadful ordeal, lie back down, now, we've got everything under control...."

"YOU HAVEN'T!" Harry yelled. "YOUVE GOT THE WRONG MAN!"

"Minister, listen, please," Hermione said; she had hurried to Harry's side and was gazing imploringly into Fudge's face. "I saw him too. It was Ron's rat, he's an Animagus, Pettigrew, I mean, and --"

"You see, Minister?" said Snape. "Confunded, both of them.... Black's done a very good job on them...." "WE'RE NOT CONFUNDED!" Harry roared.

"Minister! Professor!" said Madam Pomfrey angrily. "I must insist that you leave. Potter is my patient, and he should not be distressed!"

"I'm not distressed, I'm trying to tell them what happened!" Harry said furiously. "If they'd just listen --"

But Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of chocolate into Harry's mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to force him back onto the bed.

"Now, please, Minister, these children need care. Please leave

The door opened again. It was Dumbledore. Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate with great difficulty and got up again.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sirius Black --"

"For heaven's sake!" said Madam Pomfrey hysterically. "Is this a hospital wing or not? Headmaster, I must insist --"

"My apologies, Poppy, but I need a word with Mr. Potter and Miss Granger," said Dumbledore calmly. "I have just been talking to Sirius Black --"

"I suppose he's told you the same fairy tale he's planted in Potter's mind?" spat Snape. "Something about a rat, and Pettigrew being alive --"

"That, indeed, is Black's story," said Dumbledore, surveying Snape closely through his half-moon spectacles.

"And does my evidence count for nothing?" snarled Snape. "Peter Pettigrew was not in the Shrieking Shack, nor did I see any sign of him on the grounds."

"That was because you were knocked out, Professor!" said Hermione earnestly. "You didn't arrive in time to hear

"Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

"Now, Snape," said Fudge, startled, "the young lady is disturbed in her mind, we must make allowances --"

"I would like to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," said Dumbledore abruptly. "Cornelius, Severus, Poppy -- please leave us."

"Headmaster!" sputtered Madam Pomfrey. "They need treatment, they need rest --"

"This cannot wait," said Dumbledore. "I must insist."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and strode away into her office at the end of the ward, slamming the door behind her. Fudge consulted the large gold pocket watch dangling from his waistcoat.

"The dementors should have arrived by now," he said. "I'll go and meet them. Dumbledore, I'll see you upstairs."

He crossed to the door and held it open for Snape, but Snape hadn't moved.

"You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's face.

"I wish to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," Dumbledore repeated.

Snape took a step toward Dumbledore.

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen," he breathed. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly.

Snape turned on his heel and marched through the door Fudge was still holding. It closed behind them, and Dumbledore turned to Harry and Hermione. They both burst into speech at the same time.

"Professor, Black's telling the truth -- we saw Pettigrew -- he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf --"

-- he's a rat --"

-- Pettigrew's front paw, I mean, finger, he cut it off --"

-- Pettigrew attacked Ron, it wasn't Sirius --"

But Dumbledore held up his hand to stem the flood of explanations.

"It is your turn to listen, and I beg you will not interrupt me, because there is very little time," he said quietly. "There is not a shred of proof to support Black's story, except your word -- and the word of two thirteen-year-old wizards will not convince anybody. A street full of eyewitnesses swore they saw Sirius murder Pettigrew. I myself gave evidence to the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper."

"Professor Lupin can tell you --" Harry said, unable to stop himself

"Professor Lupin is currently deep in the forest, unable to tell anyone anything. By the time he is human again, it will be too late, Sirius will be worse than dead. I might add that werewolves are so mistrusted by most of our kind that his support will count for very little -- and the fact that he and Sirius are old friends --"

"But --"

"Listen to me, Harry. It is too late, you understand me? You must see that Professor Snape's version of events is far more convincing than yours."

"He hates Sirius," Hermione said desperately. "All because of some stupid trick Sirius played on him --"

"Sirius has not acted like an innocent man. The attack on the Fat Lady -- entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife -- without Pettigrew, alive or dead, we have no chance of overturning Sirius's sentence."

"But you believe us."

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore quietly. "But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Minister of Magic...."

Harry stared up into the grave face and felt as though the ground beneath him were falling sharply away. He had grown used to the idea that Dumbledore could solve anything. He had expected Dumbledore to pull some amazing solution out of the air. But no ... their last hope was gone.

"What we need," said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from Harry to Hermione, "is more time."

"But --" Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. "OH!"

"Now, pay attention," said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly. "Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law -- you know what is at stake.... You -- must -- not -- be -- seen."

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. Dumbledore had turned on his heel and looked back as he reached the door.

"I am going to lock you in. It is --" he consulted his watch, "five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

"Good luck?" Harry repeated as the door closed behind Dumbledore. "Three turns? What's he talking about? What are we supposed to do?"

But Hermione was fumbling with the neck of her robes, pulling from beneath them a very long, very fine gold chain.

"Harry, come here," she said urgently. "Quick!"

Harry moved toward her, completely bewildered. She was holding the chain out. He saw a tiny, sparkling hourglass hanging from it.

"Here --"

She had thrown the chain around his neck too.

"Ready?" she said breathlessly.

"What are we doing?" Harry said, completely lost.

Hermione turned the hourglass over three times.

The dark ward dissolved. Harry had the sensation that he was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes rushed past him, his ears were pounding, he tried to yell but couldn't hear his own voice --

And then he felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into focus again --

He was standing next to Hermione in the deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across the paved floor from the open front doors. He looked wildly around at Hermione, the chain of the hourglass cutting into his neck.

"Hermione, what --?"

"In here!" Hermione seized Harry's arm and dragged him across the hall

to the door of a broom closet; she opened it, pushed him inside among the buckets and mops, then slammed the door behind them.

"What -- how -- Hermione, what happened?"

"We've gone back in time," Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry's neck in the darkness. "Three hours back..."

Harry found his own leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out the possibility that he was having a very bizarre dream.

"But --"

"Shh! Listen! Someone's coming! I think -- I think it might be us!" Hermione had her ear pressed against the cupboard door.

"Footsteps across the hall... yes, I think it's us going down to Hagrid's!"

"Are you telling me," Harry whispered, "that we're here in this cupboard and we're out there too?"

"Yes," said Hermione, her ear still glued to the cupboard door. "I'm sure it's us. It doesn't sound like more than three people... and we're walking slowly because we're under the Invisibility Cloak -- "

She broke off, still listening intently.

"We've gone down the front steps...."

Hermione sat down on an upturned bucket, looking desperately anxious, but Harry wanted a few questions answered.

"Where did you get that hourglass thing?"

"It's called a Time-Turner," Hermione whispered, "and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone. She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of

Magic so I could have one. She had to tell them that I was a model student, and that I'd never, ever use it for anything except my studies.... I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that's how I've been doing several lessons at once, see? But...

"Harry, I don't understand what Dumbledore wants us to do. Why did he tell us to go back three hours? How's that going to help Sirius?"

Harry stared at her shadowy face.

"There must be something that happened around now he wants us to change," he said slowly. "What happened? We were walking down to Hagrid's three hours ago...."

"This is three hours ago, and we are walking down to Hagrid's," said Hermione. "We just heard ourselves leaving...."

Harry frowned; he felt as though he were screwing up his whole brain in concentration.

"Dumbledore just said -- just said we could save more than one innocent life...." And then it hit him. "Hermione, we're going to save Buckbeak!"

"But -- how will that help Sirius?"

"Dumbledore said -- he just told us where the window is -- the window of Flitwick's office! Where they've got Sirius locked up! We've got to fly Buckbeak up to the window and rescue Sirius! Sirius can escape on Buckbeak -- they can escape together!"

From what Harry could see of Hermione's face, she looked terrified.

"If we manage that without being seen, it'll be a miracle!"

"Well, we've got to try, haven't we?" said Harry. He stood up and pressed his ear against the door. "Doesn't sound like anyone's there.... Come on, let's go."

Harry pushed open the closet door. The entrance hall was deserted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out of the closet and

down the stone steps. The shadows were already lengthening, the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

"If anyone's looking out of the window --" Hermione squeaked, looking up at the castle behind them.

"We'll run for it," said Harry determinedly. "Straight into the forest, all right? We'll have to hide behind a tree or something and keep a lookout --"

"Okay, but we'll go around by the greenhouses!" said Hermione breathlessly. "We need to keep out of sight of Hagrid's front door, or we'll see us! We must be nearly at Hagrid's by now!"

Still working out what she meant, Harry set off at a sprint, Hermione behind him. They tore across the vegetable gardens to the greenhouses, paused for a moment behind them, then set off again, fast as they could, skirting around the Whomping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of the forest....

Safe in the shadows of the trees, Harry turned around; seconds later, Hermione arrived beside him, panting.

"Right," she gasped. "We need to sneak over to Hagrid's.... Keep out of sight, Harry...."

They made their way silently through the trees, keeping to the very edge of the forest. Then, as they glimpsed the front of Hagrid's house, they heard a knock upon his door. They moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Hagrid had appeared in his doorway, shaking and white, looking around to see who had knocked. And Harry heard his own voice.

"It's us. We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered. He stood back, then shut the door quickly.

"This is the weirdest thing we've ever done," Harry said fervently.

"Let's move along a bit," Hermione whispered. "We need to get nearer to Buckbeak!"

They crept through the trees until they saw the nervous hippogriff, tethered to the fence around Hagrid's pumpkin patch.

"Now?" Harry whispered.

"No!" said Hermione. "If we steal him now, those Committee people will think Hagrid set him free! We've got to wait until they've seen he's tied outside!"

"That's going to give us about sixty seconds," said Harry. This was starting to seem impossible.

At that moment, there was a crash of breaking china from inside Hagrid's cabin.

"That's Hagrid breaking the milk jug," Hermione whispered. "I'm going to find Scabbers in a moment --"

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Hermione's shriek of surprise.

"Hermione," said Harry suddenly, "what if we -- we just run in there and grab Pettigrew --"

"No!" said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Don't you understand? We're breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody! You heard Dumbledore, if we're seen --"

"We'd only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!"

"Harry, what do you think you'd do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid's house?" said Hermione.

"I'd -- I'd think I'd gone mad," said Harry, "or I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on --"

"Exactly! You wouldn't understand, you might even attack yourself! Don't you see? Professor McGonagall told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time.... Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!"

"Okay!" said Harry. "It was just an idea, I just thought

But Hermione nudged him and pointed toward the castle. Harry moved his head a few inches to get a clear view of the distant front doors. Dumbledore, Fudge, the old Committee member, and Macnair the executioner were coming down the steps.

"We're about to come out!" Hermione breathed.

And sure enough, moments later, Hagrid's back door opened, and Harry saw himself, Ron, and Hermione walking out of it with Hagrid. It was, without a doubt, the strangest sensation of his life, standing behind the tree, and watching himself in the pumpkin patch.

"It's Okay, Beaky, it's okay..." Hagrid said to Buckbeak. Then he turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on. Get goin'."

"Hagrid, we can't --"

"We'll tell them what really happened

"They can't kill him --"

"Go! It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

Harry watched the Hermione in the pumpkin patch throw the Invisibility Cloak over him and Ron.

"Go quick. Don' listen...."

There was a knock on Hagrid's front door. The execution party had arrived. Hagrid turned, around and headed back into his cabin, leaving the back door ajar. Harry watched the grass flatten in patches all around the cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreating. He, Ron, and Hermione had gone... but the Harry and Hermione hidden in the trees

could now hear what was happening inside the cabin through the back door.

"Where is the beast?" came the cold voice of Macnair.

"Out -- outside," Hagrid croaked.

Harry pulled his head out of sight as Macnair's face appeared at Hagrid's window, staring out at Buckbeak. Then they heard Fudge.

"We -- er -- have to read you the official notice of execution, Hagrid. I'll make it quick. And then you and Macnair need to sign it. Macnair, You're supposed to listen too, that's procedure --"

Macnair's face vanished from the window. It was now or never.

"Wait here," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I'll do it."

As Fudge's voice started again, Harry darted out from behind his tree, vaulted the fence into the pumpkin patch, and approached Buckbeak.

"It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter called the condemned, shall be executed on the sixth of June at sundown --"

Careful not to blink, Harry stared up into Buckbeak's fierce orange eyes once more and bowed. Buckbeak sank to his scaly knees and then stood up again. Harry began to fumble with the knot of rope tying Buckbeak to the fence.

"... sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee's appointed executioner, Walden Macnai..."

"Come on, Buckbeak," Harry murmured, "come on, we're going to help you. Quietly... quietly..."

"... as witnessed below. Hagrid, you sign here..."

Harry threw all his weight onto the rope, but Buckbeak had dug in his front feet.

"Well, let's get this over with," said the reedy voice of the Committee member from inside Hagrid's cabin. "Hagrid, perhaps it will be better if you stay inside --"

"No, I -- I wan' ter be with him.... I don' wan' him ter be alone --"

Footsteps echoed from within the cabin.

"Buckbeak, move!" Harry hissed.

Harry tugged harder on the rope around Buckbeak's neck. The hippogriff began to walk, rustling its wings irritably. They were still ten feet away from the forest, in plain view of Hagrid's back door. "One moment, please, Macnair," came Dumbledore's voice. "You need to sign too." The footsteps stopped. Harry heaved on the rope. Buckbeak snapped his beak and walked a little faster.

Hermione's white face was sticking out from behind a tree.

"Harry, hurry!" she mouthed.

Harry could still hear Dumbledore's voice talking from within the cabin. He gave the rope another wrench. Buckbeak broke into a grudging trot. They had reached the trees....

"Quick! Quick!" Hermione moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing the rope too and adding her weight to make Buckbeak move faster. Harry looked over his shoulder; they were now blocked from sight; they couldn't see Hagrid's garden at all.

"Stop!" he whispered to Hermione. "They might hear us"

Hagrid's back door had opened with a bang. Harry, Hermione, and Buckbeak stood quite still; even the hippogriff seemed to be listening intently.

Silence... then --

"Where is it?" said the reedy voice of the Committee member. "Where is the beast?"

"It was tied here!" said the executioner furiously. I saw it! just here!"

"How extraordinary," said Dumbledore. There was a note of amusement in his voice.

"Beaky!" said Hagrid huskily.

There was a swishing noise, and the thud of an axe. The executioner seemed to have swung it into the fence in anger. And then came the howling, and this time they could hear Hagrid's words through his sobs.

"Gone! Gone! Bless his little beak, he's gone! Musta pulled himself free! Beaky, yeh clever boy!"

Buckbeak started to strain against the rope, trying to get back to Hagrid. Harry and Hermione tightened their grip and dug their heels into the forest floor to stop him.

"Someone untied him!" the executioner was snarling. "We should search the grounds, the forest."

"Macnair, if Buckbeak has indeed been stolen, do you really think the thief will have led him away on foot?" said Dumbledore, still sounding amused. "Search the skies, if you will.... Hagrid, I could do with a cup of tea. Or a large brandy."

"O' -- o' course, Professor," said Hagrid, who sounded weak with happiness. "Come in, come in...."

Harry and Hermione listened closely. They heard footsteps, the soft cursing of the executioner, the snap of the door, and then silence once more.

"Now what?" whispered Harry, looking around.

"We'll have to hide in here," said Hermione, who looked very shaken. "We need to wait until they've gone back to the castle. Then we wait until it's safe to fly Buckbeak up to Sirius's window. He won't be there for

another couple of hours.... Oh, this is going to be difficult...."

She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of the forest. The sun was setting now.

"We're going to have to move," said Harry, thinking hard. "We've got to be able to see the Whomping Willow, or we won't know what's going on."

"Okay," said Hermione, getting a firmer grip on Buckbeak's rope. "But we've got to keep out of sight, Harry, remember...."

They moved around the edge of the forest, darkness falling thickly around them, until they were hidden behind a clump of trees through which they could make out the Willow.

"There's Ron!" said Harry suddenly.

A dark figure was sprinting across the lawn and its shout echoed through the still night air.

"Get away from him -- get away -- Scabbers, come here --"

And then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Harry watched himself and Hermione chasing after Ron. Then he saw Ron dive.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat --"

"There's Sirius!" said Harry. The great shape of the dog had bounded out from the roots of the Willow. They saw him bowl Harry over, then seize Ron....

"Looks even worse from here, doesn't it?" said Harry, watching the dog pulling Ron into the roots. "Ouch -- look, I just got walloped by the tree -- and so did you -- this is weird--"

The Whomping Willow was creaking and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there, trying to reach the trunk. And then the tree froze.

"That was Crookshanks pressing the knot," said Hermione.

"And there we go..." Harry muttered. "We're in."

The moment they disappeared, the tree began to move again. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Dumbledore, Macnair, Fudge, and the old Committee member were making their way up to the castle.

"Right after we'd gone down into the passage!" said Hermione. "If only Dumbledore had come with us..."

"Macnair and Fudge would've come too," said Harry bitterly. "I bet you anything Fudge would've told Macnair to murder Sirius on the spot...."

They watched the four men climb the castle steps and disappear from view. For a few minutes the scene was deserted. Then --

"Here comes Lupin!" said Harry as they saw another figure sprinting down the stone steps and hating toward the Willow. Harry looked up at the sky. Clouds were obscuring the moon completely.

They watched Lupin seize a broken branch from the ground and prod the knot on the trunk. The tree stopped fighting, and Lupin, too, disappeared into the gap in its roots.

"If he'd only grabbed the cloak," said Harry. "It's just lying there...."

He turned to Hermione.

"If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Snape'd never be able to get it and --"

"Harry, we mustn't be seen!"

"How can you stand this?" he asked Hermione fiercely. "Just standing here and watching it happen?" He hesitated. "I'm going to grab the cloak!"

"Harry, no!"

Hermione seized the back of Harry's robes not a moment too soon. just then, they heard a burst of song. It was Hagrid, making his way up to the castle, singing at the top of his voice, and weaving slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands.

"See?" Hermione whispered. "See what would have happened? We've got to keep out of sight! No, Buckbeak!"

The hippogriff was making frantic attempts to get to Hagrid again; Harry seized his rope too, straining to hold Buckbeak back. They watched Hagrid meander tipsily up to the castle. He was gone. Buckbeak stopped fighting to get away. His head drooped sadly.

Barely two minutes later, the castle doors flew open yet again, and Snape came charging out of them, running toward the Willow.

Harry's fists clenched as they watched Snape skid to a halt next to the tree, looking around. He grabbed the cloak and held it up.

"Get your filthy hands off it," Harry snarled under his breath. "Shh!"

Snape seized the branch Lupin had used to freeze the tree, prodded the knot, and vanished from view as he put on the cloak.

"So that's it," said Hermione quietly. "We're all down there... and now we've just got to wait until we come back up again...."

She took the end of Buckbeak's rope and tied it securely around the nearest tree, then sat down on the dry ground, arms around her knees.

"Harry, there's something I don't understand... Why didn't the dementors get Sirius? I remember them coming, and then I think I passed out... there were so many of them...."

Harry sat down too. He explained what he'd seen; how, as the nearest dementor had lowered its mouth to Harry's, a large silver something had come galloping across the lake and forced the dementors to retreat.

Hermione's mouth was slightly open by the time Harry had finished.

"But what was it?"

"There's only one thing it could have been, to make the dementors go," said Harry. "A real Patronus. A powerful one."

"But who conjured it?"

Harry didn't say anything. He was thinking back to the person he'd seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who he thought it had been... but how could it have been?

"Didn't you see what they looked like?" said Hermione eagerly. "Was it one of the teachers?"

"No," said Harry. "He wasn't a teacher."

"But it must have been a really powerful wizard, to drive all those dementors away... If the Patronus was shining so brightly, didn't it light him up? Couldn't you see --?"

"Yeah, I saw him," said Harry slowly. "But... maybe I imagined it.... I wasn't thinking straight.... I passed out right afterward...."

"Who did you think it was?"

I think --" Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. I think it was my dad."

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

"Harry, your dad's -- well -- dead," she said quietly.

"I know that," said Harry quickly.

"You think you saw his ghost?"

"I don't know... no... he looked solid...."

"But then --"

"Maybe I was seeing things," said Harry. "But... from what I could see... it looked like him.... I've got photos of him...."

Hermione was still looking at him as though worried about his sanity.

"I know it sounds crazy," said Harry flatly. He turned to look at Buckbeak, who was digging his beak into the ground, apparently searching for worms. But he wasn't really watching Buckbeak.

He was thinking about his father and about his father's three oldest friends... Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.... Had all four of them been out on the grounds tonight? Wormtail had reappeared this evening when everyone had thought he was dead.... Was it so impossible his father had done the same? Had he been seeing things across the lake? The figure had been too far away to see distinctly... yet he had felt sure, for a moment, before he'd lost consciousness....

The leaves overhead rustled faintly in the breeze. The moon drifted in and out of sight behind the shifting clouds. Hermione sat with her face turned toward the Willow, waiting.

And then, at last, after over an hour...

"Here we come!" Hermione whispered.

She and Harry got to their feet. Buckbeak raised his head. They saw Lupin, Ron, and Pettigrew clambering awkwardly out of the hole in the roots. Then came Hermione... then the unconscious Snape, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Harry and Black. They all began to walk toward the castle.

Harry's heart was starting to beat very fast. He glanced up at the sky. Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show the moon....

"Harry," Hermione muttered as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, "we've got to stay put. We mustn't be seen. There's nothing we can do...."

"So we're just going to let Pettigrew escape all over again.. said Harry

quietly.

"How do you expect to find a rat in the dark?" snapped Hermione.
"There's nothing we can do! We came back to help Sirius; we're not supposed to be doing anything else!"

"All right!"

The moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw the tiny figures across the grounds stop. Then they saw movement --

"There goes Lupin," Hermione whispered. "He's transforming

"Hermione!" said Harry suddenly. "We've got to move!"

"We mustn't, I keep telling you --"

"Not to interfere! Lupin's going to run into the forest, right at us!"

Hermione gasped.

"Quick!" she moaned, dashing to untie Buckbeak. "Quick! Where are we going to go? Where are we going to hide? The dementors will be coming any moment --"

"Back to Hagrid's!" Harry said. "It's empty now -- come on!"

They ran as fast as they could, Buckbeak cantering along behind them. They could hear the werewolf howling behind them....

The cabin was in sight; Harry skidded to the door, wrenched it open, and Hermione and Buckbeak flashed past him; Harry threw himself in after them and bolted the door. Fang the boarhound barked loudly.

"Shh, Fang, it's us!" said Hermione, hurrying over and scratching his ears to quieten him. "That was really close!" she said to Harry.

"Yeah..."

Harry was looking out of the window. It was much harder to see what was

going on from here. Buckbeak seemed very happy to find himself back inside Hagrid's house. He lay down in front of the fire, folded his wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

"I think I'd better go outside again, you know," said Harry slowly. "I can't see what's going on -- we won't know when it's time --"

Hermione looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

"I'm not going to try and interfere," said Harry quickly. "But if we don't see what's going on, how're we going to know when it's time to rescue Sirius?"

"Well... okay, then... I'll wait here with Buckbeak... but Harry, be careful -- there's a werewolf out there -- and the dementors

Harry stepped outside again and edged around the cabin. He could hear yelping in the distance. That meant the dementors were closing in on Sirius.... He and Hermione would be running to him any moment....

Harry stared out toward the lake, his heart doing a kind of drumroll in his chest.... Whoever had sent that Patronus would be appearing at any moment....

For a fraction of a second he stood, irresolute, in front of Hagrid's door. You must not be seen. But he didn't want to be seen. He wanted to do the seeing.... He had to know...

And there were the dementors. They were emerging out of the darkness from every direction, gliding around the edges of the lake.... They were moving away from where Harry stood, to the opposite bank.... He wouldn't have to get near them....

Harry began to run. He had no thought in his head except his father... If it was him... if it really was him... he had to know, had to find out....

The lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On the opposite bank, he could see tiny glimmers of silver -- his own attempts at a Patronus --

There was a bush at the very edge of the water. Harry threw himself behind it, peering desperately through the leaves. On the opposite bank, the glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through him -- any moment now --

"Come on!" he muttered, staring about. "Where are you? Dad, come on --"

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its hood. It was time for the rescuer to appear -- but no one was coming to help this time --

And then it hit him -- he understood. He hadn't seen his father -- he had seen himself --

Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse. It was galloping silently away from him, across the black surface of the lake. He saw it lower its head and charge at the swarming dementors.... Now it was galloping around and around the black shapes on the ground, and the dementors were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness.... They were gone.

The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry across the still surface of the water. It wasn't a horse. It wasn't a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as the moon above ... it was coming back to him....

It stopped on the bank. Its hooves made no mark on the soft ground as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. Slowly, it bowed its antlered head. And Harry realized... "Prongs," he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished.

Harry stood there, hand still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of his heart, he heard hooves behind him -he whirled around and saw Hermione dashing toward him, dragging Buckbeak behind her.

"What did you do?" she said fiercely. "You said you were only going to keep a lookout!"

"I just saved all our lives...," said Harry. "Get behind here -- behind this bush -- I'll explain."

Hermione listened to what had just happened with her mouth open yet again.

"Did anyone see you?"

"Yes, haven't you been listening? I saw me but I thought I was my dad! It's okay!"

"Harry, I can't believe it... You conjured up a Patronus that drove away all those dementors! That's very, very advanced magic. I knew I could do it this time," said Harry, "because I'd already done it... Does that make sense?"

"I don't know -- Harry, look at Snape!"

Together they peered around the bush at the other bank. Snape had regained consciousness. He was conjuring stretchers and lifting the limp forms of Harry, Hermione, and Black onto them. A fourth stretcher, no doubt bearing Ron, was already floating at his side. Then, wand held out in front of him, he moved them away toward the castle.

"Right, it's nearly time," said Hermione tensely, looking at her watch. "We've got about forty-five minutes until Dumbledore locks the door to the hospital wing. We've got to rescue Sirius and get back into the ward before anybody realizes we're missing.... 11

They waited, watching the moving clouds reflected in the lake, while the bush next to them whispered in the breeze. Buckbeak, bored, was ferreting for worms again.

"D' you reckon he's up there yet?" said Harry, checking his watch. He looked up at the castle and began counting the windows to the right of the West Tower.

"Look!" Hermione whispered. "\Who's that? Someone's coming back out of the castle!"

Harry stared through the darkness. The man was hurrying across the grounds, toward one of the entrances. Something shiny glinted in his belt.

"Macnair!" said Harry. "The executioner! He's gone to get the dementors! This is it, Hermione --"

Hermione put her hands on Buckbeak's back and Harry gave her a leg up. Then he placed his foot on one of the lower branches of the bush and climbed up in front of her. He pulled Buckbeak's rope back over his neck and tied it to the other side of his collar like reins.

"Ready?" he whispered to Hermione. "YotM better hold on to me --"

He nudged Buckbeak's sides with his heels.

Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air. Harry gripped his flanks with his knees, feeling the great wings rising powerfully beneath them. Hermione was holding Harry very tight around the waist; he could hear her muttering, "Oh, no -- I don't like this oh, I really don't like this --"

Harry urged Buckbeak forward. They were gliding quietly toward the upper floors of the castle.... Harry pulled hard on the left-hand side of the rope, and Buckbeak turned. Harry was trying to count the windows flashing past --

"Whoa!" he said, pulling backward as hard as he could.

Buckbeak slowed down and they found themselves at a stop, unless you counted the fact that they kept rising up and down several feet as the hippogriff beat his wings to remain airborne.

"He's there!" Harry said, spotting Sirius as they rose up beside the window. He reached out, and as Buckbeak's wings fell, was able to tap sharply on the glass.

Black looked up. Harry saw his jaw drop. He leapt from his chair, hurried to the window and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Stand back!" Hermione called to him, and she took out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand.

"Alohomora!"

The window sprang open.

"How -- how --?" said Black weakly, staring at the hippogriff

"Get on -- there's not much time," said Harry, gripping Buckbeak firmly on either side of his sleek neck to hold him steady. "You've got to get out of here -the dementors are coming -- Macnair's gone to get them."

Black placed a hand on either side of the window frame and heaved his head and shoulders out of it. It was very lucky he was so thin. In seconds, he had managed to fling one leg over Buckbeak's back and pull himself onto the hippogriff behind Hermione.

"Okay, Buckbeak, up!" said Harry, shaking the rope. "Up to the tower -- come on.

The hippogriff gave one sweep of its mighty wings and they were soaring upward again, high as the top of the West Tower. Buckbeak landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off him at once.

"Sirius, you'd better go, quick," Harry panted. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment, they'll find out you're gone."

Buckbeak pawed the ground, tossing his sharp head.

"What happened to the other boy? Ron?" croaked Sirius.

"He's going to be okay. He's still out of it, but Madam Pomfrey says

she'll be able to make him better. Quick -- go --"

But Black was still staring down at Harry.

"How can I ever thank --"

"GO!" Harry and Hermione shouted together.

Black wheeled Buckbeak around, facing the open sky.

"We'll see each other again," he said. "You are -- truly your father's son, Harry...."

He squeezed Buckbeak's sides with his heels. Harry and Hermione jumped back as the enormous wings rose once more.... The hippogriff took off into the air.... He and his rider became smaller and smaller as Harry gazed after them... then a cloud drifted across the moon.... They were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OWL POST AGAIN

Harry!"

Hermione was tugging at his sleeve, staring at her watch. "We've got exactly ten minutes to get back down to the hospital wing without anybody seeing us -- before Dumbledore locks the door --"

"Okay," said Harry, wrenching his gaze from the sky, "let's go...."

They slipped through the doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling stone staircase. As they reached the bottom of it, they heard voices. They flattened themselves against the wall and listened. It sounded like Fudge and Snape. They were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the staircase.

"... only hope Dumbledore's not going to make difficulties," Snape was saying. "The Kiss will be performed immediately?"

"As soon as Macnair returns with the dementors. This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to informing the Daily Prophet that we've got him at last.... I daresay they'll want to interview you, Snape... and once young Harry's back in his right mind, I expect he'll want to tell the Prophet exactly how you saved him...."

Harry clenched his teeth. He caught a glimpse of Snape's smirk as he and Fudge passed Harry and Hermione's hiding place. Their footsteps died away. Harry and Hermione waited a few moments to make sure they'd really gone, then started to run in the opposite direction. Down one staircase, then another, along a new ,corridor -- then they heard a cackling ahead.

"Peeves!" Harry muttered, grabbing Hermione's wrist. "In here!"

They tore into a deserted classroom to their left just in time. Peeves seemed to be bouncing along the corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing his head off.

"Oh, he's horrible," whispered Hermione, her ear to the door. "I bet he's all excited because the dementors are going to finish off Sirius...." She checked her watch. "Three minutes, Harry!"

They waited until Peeves's gloating voice had faded into the distance, then slid back out of the room and broke into a run again.

"Hermione -- what'll happen -- if we don't get back inside before Dumbledore locks the door?" Harry panted.

"I don't want to think about it!" Hermione moaned, checking her watch again. "One minute!"

They had reached the end of the corridor with the hospital wing entrance. "Okay -- I can hear Dumbledore," said Hermione tensely. "Come on, Harry!"

They crept along the corridor. The door opened. Dumbledore's back appeared.

"I am going to lock you in," they heard him saying. "it is five minutes

to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

Dumbledore backed out of the room, closed the door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Panicking, Harry and Hermione ran forward. Dumbledore looked up, and a wide smile appeared under the long silver mustache. "Well?" he said quietly.

"We did it!" said Harry breathlessly. "Sirius has gone, on Buckbeak...."

Dumbledore beamed at them.

"Well done. I think --" He listened intently for any sound within the hospital wing. "Yes, I think you've gone too -- get inside -- I'll lock you in --"

Harry and Hermione slipped back inside the dormitory. It was empty except for Ron, who was still lying motionless in the end bed. As the lock clicked behind them, Harry and Hermione crept back to their own beds, Hermione tucking the Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomfrey came striding back out of her office.

"Did I hear the headmaster leaving? Am I allowed to look after my patients now?"

She was in a very bad mood. Harry and Hermione thought it best to accept their chocolate quietly. Madam Pomfrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. But Harry could hardly swallow. He and Hermione were waiting, listening, their nerves jangling.... And then, as they both took a fourth piece of chocolate from Madam Pomfrey, they heard a distant roar of fury echoing from somewhere above them....

"What was that?" said Madam Pomfrey in alarm.

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and louder. Madam Pomfrey was staring at the door.

"Really -- they'll wake everybody up! What do they think they're doing?"

Harry was trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were drawing nearer --

"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out --"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Snape roared, now very close at hand. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE! THIS -- HAS -- SOMETHING -- TO -- DO -- WITH -- POTTER!"

"Severus -- be reasonable -- Harry has been locked up --"

BAM.

The door of the hospital wing burst open.

Fudge, Snape, and Dumbledore came striding into the ward. Dumbledore alone looked calm. Indeed, he looked as though he was quite enjoying himself. Fudge appeared angry. But Snape was beside himself.

"OUT WITH IT, POTTER!" he bellowed. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Professor Snape!" shrieked Madam Pomfrey. "Control yourself!"

"See here, Snape, be reasonable," said Fudge. "This door's been locked, we just saw --"

"THEY HELPED HIM ESCAPE, I KNOW IT!" Snape howled, pointing at Harry and Hermione. His face was twisted; spit was flying from his mouth.

"Calm down, man!" Fudge barked. "You're talking nonsense!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW POTTER!" shrieked Snape. "HE DID IT, I KNOW HE DID IT --"

"That will do, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly. "Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left the ward ten minutes ago. Madam Pomfrey, have these students left their beds?"

"Of course not!" said Madam Pomfrey, bristling. "I would have heard them!"

"Well, there you have it, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I'm afraid I don't see any point in troubling them further."

Snape stood there, seething, staring from Fudge, who looked thoroughly shocked at his behavior, to Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling behind his glasses. Snape whirled about, robes swishing behind him, and stormed out of the ward.

"Fellow seems quite unbalanced," said Fudge, staring after him. "I'd watch out for him if I were you, Dumbledore."

"Oh, he's not unbalanced," said Dumbledore quietly. "He's just suffered a severe disappointment."

"He's not the only one!" puffed Fudge. "The Daily Prophet's going to have a field day! We had Black cornered and he slipped through our fingers yet again! All it needs now is for the story of that hippogriff's escape to get out, and I'll be a laughingstock! Well... I'd better go and notify the Ministry....."

"And the dementors?" said Dumbledore. "They'll be removed from the school, I trust?"

"Oh yes, they'll have to go," said Fudge, running his fingers

distractedly through his hair. "Never dreamed they'd attempt to administer the Kiss on an innocent boy... Completely out of control... no, I'll have them packed off back to Azkaban tonight.... Perhaps we should think about dragons at the school entrance...."

"Hagrid would like that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry and Hermione. As he and Fudge left the dormitory, Madam Pomfrey hurried to the door and locked it again. Muttering angrily to herself, she headed back to her office.

There was a low moan from the other end of the ward. Ron had woken up.

They could see him sitting up, rubbing his head, looking around.

"What -- what happened?" he groaned. "Harry? Why are we in here? Where's Sirius? Where's Lupin? What's going on?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"You explain," said Harry, helping himself to some more chocolate.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. The sweltering heat and the end of the exams meant that everyone was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt like going, however, so they and Harry wandered onto the grounds, still talking about the extraordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Sitting near the lake, watching the giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the water, Harry lost the thread of the conversation as he looked across to the opposite bank. The stag had galloped toward him from there just last night....

A shadow fell across them and they looked 'tip to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs and beaming down at them.

"Know I shouldn' feel happy, after wha' happened las' night," he said. "I mean, Black escapin' again, an, everythin' -- but guess what?"

"What?" they said, pretending to look curious.

"Beaky! He escaped! He's free! Bin celebratin' all night!"

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

"Yeah... can't've tied him up properly," said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. "I was worried this mornin', mind... thought he mighta met Professor Lupin on the grounds, but Lupin says he never ate anythin' las' night...."

"What?" said Harry quickly.

"Blimey, haven' yeh heard?" said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody in sight. "Er -- Snape told all the Slytherins this mornin'.... Thought everyone'd know by now... Professor Lupin's a werewolf, see. An' he was loose on the grounds las' night.... He's packin' now, o' course.

"He's packing?" said Harry, alarmed. "Why?"

"Leavin', isn' he?" said Hagrid, looking surprised that Harry had to ask. "Resigned firs' thing this mornin'. Says he can't risk it happenin' again.

Harry scrambled to his feet.

"I'm going to see him," he said to Ron and Hermione.

"But if he's resigned --"

"-- doesn't sound like there's anything we can do --"

"I don't care. I still want to see him. I'll meet you back here."

Lupin's office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The grindylow's empty tank stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

"I saw you coming," said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder's Map.

"I just saw Hagrid," said Harry. "And he said you'd resigned. It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

"Why?" said Harry. "The Ministry of Magic don't think you were helping Sirius, do they?"

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

"No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives." He sighed. "That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he -- er -- accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents.... They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you.... That must never happen again."

"You're the best Defense Against the Dark Arts- teacher we've ever had!" said Harry. "Don't go!"

Lupin shook his head and didn't speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of a good argument to make him stay, Lupin said, "From what the headmaster told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. if I'm proud of anything I've done this year, it's how much you've learned.... Tell me about your Patronus."

"How d'you know about that?" said Harry, distracted.

"What else could have driven the dementors back?"

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he'd finished, Lupin was smiling again.

"Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed," he said. "You guessed right... that's why we called him Prongs."

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry.

"Here -- I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night," he said,

handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. "And..." He hesitated, then held out the Marauder's Map too. "I am no longer your teacher, so I don't feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It's no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it."

Harry took the map and grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school... you said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle."

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank You, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty grindylow tank.

"Well -- good-bye, Harry," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again sometime. Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage...."

Harry had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Good-bye, then, Remus," said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands. Then, with a final nod to Harry and a swift smile, Lupin left the office.

Harry sat down in his vacated chair, staring glumly at the floor. He

heard the door close and looked up. Dumbledore was still there.

"Why so miserable, Harry?" he said quietly. "You should be very proud of yourself after last night."

"It didn't make any difference," said Harry bitterly. "Pettigrew got away."

"Didn't make any difference?" said Dumbledore quietly, "It made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate."

Terrible. Something stirred in Harry's memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before... Professor Trelawney's prediction!

"Professor Dumbledore -- yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very -- very strange."

"Indeed?" said Dumbledore. "Er -- stranger than usual, you mean?"

"Yes... her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said ... she said Voldemort's servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight.... She said the servant would help him come back to power." Harry stared up at Dumbledore. "And then she sort of became normal again, and she couldn't remember anything she'd said. Was it -- was she making a real prediction?"

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been." he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise...."

"But --" Harry looked at him, aghast. How could Dumbledore take this so calmly?

"But -- I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault if Voldemort comes back!"

"It does not," said Dumbledore quietly. "Hasn't your experience with the

Time-Turner taught you anything, Harry? The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed.... Professor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that.... You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life."

"But if he helps Voldemort back to power

"Pettigrew owes his life to you. You have sent Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt.... When one wizard saves another wizard's life, it creates a certain bond between them... and I'm much mistaken if Voldemort wants his servant in the debt of Harry Potter."

"I don't want a connection with Pettigrew!" said Harry. "He betrayed my parents!"

"This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry. But trust me... the time may come when you will be very glad you saved Pettigrew's life."

Harry couldn't imagine when that would be. Dumbledore looked as though he knew what Harry was thinking.

"I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and later, Harry," he said gently. "He would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it."

Harry looked up at him. Dumbledore wouldn't laugh -- he could tell Dumbledore...

"I thought it was my dad who'd conjured my Patronus. I mean, when I saw myself across the lake ... I thought I was seeing him." "An easy mistake to make," said Dumbledore softly. "I expect you'll tire of hearing it, but you do look extraordinarily like James. Except for the eyes... you have your mother's eyes."

Harry shook his head.

"It was stupid, thinking it was him," he muttered. "I mean, I knew he was dead."

"You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus? Prongs rode again last night."

It took a moment for Harry to realize what Dumbledore had said.

Last night Sirius told me all about how they became Animagi," said Dumbledore, smiling. "An extraordinary achievement -- not least, keeping it quiet from me. And then I remembered the most unusual form your Patronus took, when it charged Mr. Malfoy down at your Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night.... You found him inside yourself."

And Dumbledore left the office, leaving Harry to his very confused thoughts.

Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened the night that Sirius, Buckbeak, and Pettigrew had vanished except Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore. As the end of term approached, Harry heard many different theories about what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.

Malfoy was furious about Buckbeak. He was convinced that Hagrid had found a way of smuggling the hippogriff to safety, and seemed outraged that he and his father had been outwitted by a gamekeeper. Percy Weasley, meanwhile, had much to say on the subject of Sirius's escape.

"If I manage to get into the Ministry, I'll have a lot of proposals to make about Magical Law Enforcement!" he told the only person who would listen -- his girlfriend, Penelope.

Though the weather was perfect, though the atmosphere was so

cheerful, though he knew they had achieved the near impossible in helping Sirius to freedom, Harry had never approached the end of a school year in worse spirits.

He certainly wasn't the only one who was sorry to see Professor Lupin

go. The whole of Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts class was miserable about his resignation.

"Wonder what they'll give us next year?" said Seamus Finnigan gloomily.

"Maybe a vampire," suggested Dean Thomas hopefully.

It wasn't only Professor Lupin's departure that was weighing on Harry's mind. He couldn't help thinking a lot about Professor Trelawney's prediction. He kept wondering where Pettigrew was now, whether he had sought sanctuary with Voldemort yet. But the thing that was lowering Harry's spirits most of all was the prospect of returning to the Dursleys. For maybe half an hour, a glorious half hour, he had believed he would be living with Sirius from now on... his parents' best friend.... It would have been the next best thing to having his own father back. And while no news of Sirius was definitely good news, because it meant he had successfully gone into hiding, Harry couldn't help feeling miserable when he thought of the home he might have had, and the fact that it was now impossible.

The exam results came out on the last day of term. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had passed every subject. Harry was amazed that he had got through Potions. He had a shrewd suspicion that Dumbledore might have stepped in to stop Snape failing him on purpose. Snape's behavior toward Harry over the past week had been quite alarming. Harry wouldn't have thought it possible that Snape's dislike for him could increase, but it certainly had. A muscle twitched unpleasantly at the corner of Snape's thin mouth every time he looked at Harry, and he was constantly flexing his fingers, as though itching to place them around Harry's throat.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, meanwhile, largely thanks to their spectacular performance in the Quidditch Cup, had won the House championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold, and that the Gryffindor table was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated. Even Harry managed to forget about the journey back to the Dursleys the next day as he ate, drank, talked, and laughed with the rest.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next mornIng,

Hermione gave Harry and Ron some surprising news.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent!" said Ron.

"I know," sighed Hermione, "but I can't stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I've handed it in. Without Muggle Studies and Divination, I'll be able to have a normal schedule again."

I still can't believe you didn't tell us about it," said Ron grumpily.
"We're supposed to be your friends."

"I promised I wouldn't tell anyone," said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear from view behind a mountain. Two whole months before he'd see it again....

"Oh, cheer up, Harry!" said Hermione sadly.

"I'm okay," said Harry quickly. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I'll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now --"

"A telephone, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year...."

Ron *ignored her.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work."

This proposal had the effect of cheering Harry up a great deal.

"Yeah... I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come... especially after what I did to Aunt Marge...."

Feeling considerably more cheerful, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in several games of Exploding Snap, and when the witch with the tea cart arrived, he bought himself a very large lunch, though nothing with chocolate in it.

But it was late in the afternoon before the thing that made him truly happy turned up....

"Harry," said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. "What's that thing outside your window?"

Harry turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. He stood up for a better look and saw that it was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over in the air, buffeted this way and that in the train's slipstream. Harry quickly pulled down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. He brought it carefully inside. The owl dropped its letter onto Harry's seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval. Crookshanks sat up in his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm's way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him. He ripped open the letter, and shouted, "It's from Sirius!"

"What?" said Ron and Hermione excitedly. "Read it aloud!"

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a

hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Firebolt --

"Ha!" said Hermione triumphantly. "See! I told you it was from him!"

"Yes, but he hadn't jinxed it, had he?" said Ron. "Ouch!" The tiny owl, now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. Please consider it as thirteen birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle's house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though he'd swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"That'll be good enough for Dumbledore!" said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius's letter. "Hang on, there's a RS...."

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly. "Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry's and Hermione's great surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."

Harry read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King's Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he, Ron, and Hermione stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Harry spotted Uncle Vernon at once. He was standing a good distance from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, eyeing them suspiciously, and when Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry in greeting, his worst suspicions about them seemed confirmed.

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley bearing his trunk and Hedwig's cage toward Uncle Vernon, who greeted him in his usual fashion.

"What's that?" he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, you've got another ---"

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from my godfather."

"Godfather?" sputtered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"

"Yes, I have," said Harry brightly. "He was my mum and dad's best friend. He's a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of wizard prison and he's on the run. He likes to keep in touch with me, though... keep

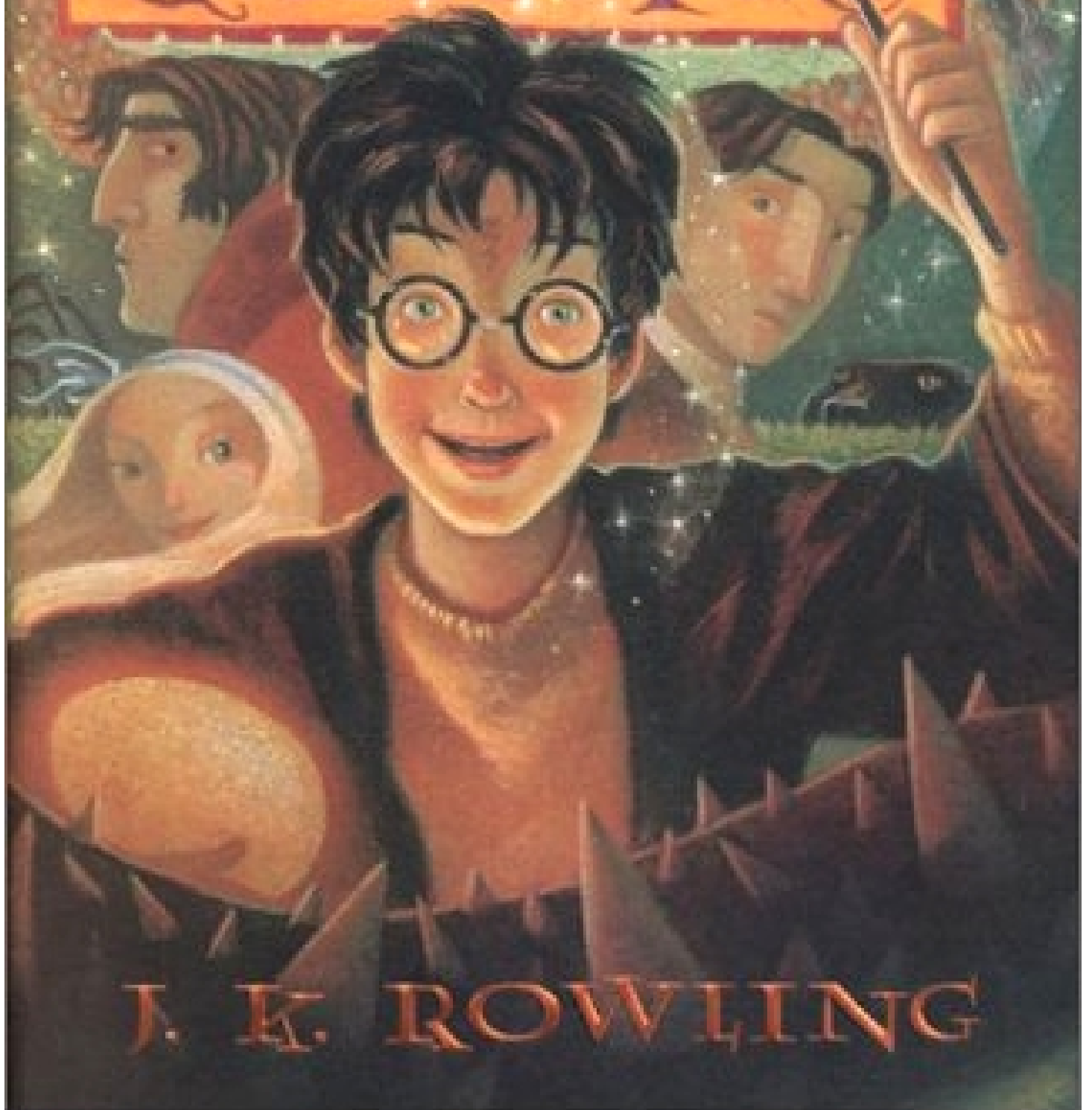
up with my news... check if I'm happy..."

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon's face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling along in front of him, for what looked like a much better summer than the last.

THE END

Harry Potter

AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE



J. K. ROWLING

Harry Potter
and the Goblet of Fire
by
J.K. Rowling

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To Peter Rowling.
In Memory of Mr. Ridley.
And to Susan Sladden.
Who Helped Harry
Out of His Cupboard.

CONTENTS

ONE

The Riddle House - 1

TWO

The Scar - 16

THREE

The Invitation - 26

FOUR

Back to the Burrow - 39

FIVE

Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes - 51

SIX

The Portkey - 65

SEVEN

Bagman and Crouch - 75

EIGHT

The Quidditch World Cup - 95

NINE

The Dark Mark - 117

TEN

Mayhem at the Ministry - 145

ELEVEN

Aboard the Hogwarts Express - 158

TWELVE

The Triwizard Tournament - 171

THIRTEEN

Mad-Eye Moody - 193

FOURTEEN

The Unforgivable Curses - 209

FIFTEEN

Beauxbatons and Durmstrang - 228

SIXTEEN

The Goblet of Fire - 248

SEVENTEEN

The Four Champions -272

EIGHTEEN

The Weighing of the Wands -288

NINETEEN

The Hungarian Horntail -313

TWENTY

The First Task - 337

TWENTY-ONE

The House-Elf Liberation Front - 363

TWENTY-TWO

The Unexpected Task - 385

TWENTY-THREE

The Yule Ball - 403

TWENTY-FOUR

Rita Skeeter's Scoop - 433

TWENTY-FIVE

The Egg and the Eye - 458

TWENTY-SIX
The Second Task - 479

TWENTY-SEVEN
Padfoot Returns - 509

TWENTY-EIGHT
The Madness of Mr. Crouch - 535

TWENTY-NINE
The Dream - 564

THIRTY
The Pensive - 581

THIRTY-ONE
The Third Task - 605

THIRTY-TWO
Flesh, Blood, and Bone - 636

THIRTY-THREE
The Death Eaters - 644

THIRTY-FOUR
Priori Incantatem - 659

THIRTY-FIVE
Veritaserum - 670

THIRTY-SIX
The Parting of the Ways - 692

THIRTY-SEVEN
The Beginning - 716

HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

CHAPTER ONE - THE RIDDLE HOUSE

The villagers of Little Hangleron still called it "the Riddle House," even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy

spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hagletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy." Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer's morning when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

"Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!"

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer -- for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

"Frank!" cried several people. "Never!"

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank had come back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

"Always thought he was odd," she told the eagerly listening villagers, after her fourth sherry. "Unfriendly, like. I'm sure if I've offered him a cuppa once, I've offered it a hundred times. Never wanted to mix, he didn't."

"Ah, now," said a woman at the bar, "he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That's no reason to --"

"Who else had a key to the back door, then?" barked the cook. "There's been a spare key hanging in the gardener's cottage far back as I can remember! Nobody forced the door last night! No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping..."

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

"I always thought that he had a nasty look about him, right enough," grunted a man at the bar.

"War turned him funny, if you ask me," said the landlord.

"Told you I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn't I, Dot?" said an excited woman in the corner.

"Horrible temper," said Dot, nodding fervently. "I remember, when he was a kid..."

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating, again and again, that he was innocent, and that the only person he had seen near the house on the day of the Riddles' deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and pale. Nobody else in the village had seen any such boy, and the police were quite sure Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles' bodies came back and changed everything.

The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of the Riddles had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, strangled, suffocated, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), the Riddles all appeared to be in perfect health -- apart from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find something wrong with the bodies) that each of the Riddles had a look of terror upon his or her face -- but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being *frightened* to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were forced to let Frank go. The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone's surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned to his cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House.

"So far as I'm concerned, he killed them, and I don't care what the police say," said Dot in the Hanged Man. "And if he had any decency, he'd leave here, knowing as how we know he did it."

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next -- for neither family stayed long. Perhaps it was partly because of Frank that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, started to fall into disrepair.

The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he kept it for "tax reasons," though nobody was very clear what these might be. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the gardening, however. Frank was nearing his seventy-seventh birthday now, very deaf, his bad leg stiffer than ever, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to creep up on him, try as he might to suppress them.

Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with either. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones through the windows of the Riddle House. They rode their bicycles over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They knew that old Frank's devotion to the house and the grounds amounted almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the garden, brandishing his stick and yelling croakily at them. Frank, for his part, believed the boys tormented him because they, like their parents and

grandparents, though him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night in August and saw something very odd up at the old house, he merely assumed that the boys had gone one step further in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank's bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs into the kitchen with the idea of refilling his hot-water bottle to ease the stiffness in his knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked up at the Riddle House and saw lights glimmering in its upper windows. Frank knew at once what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they had started a fire.

Frank had no telephone, in any case, he had deeply mistrusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning about the Riddles' deaths. He put down the kettle at once, hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing a rusty old key from its hook by the door. He picked up his walking stick, which was propped against the wall, and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back of the house until he reached a door almost completely hidden by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not entered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he remembered where the door into the hall was, and he groped his way towards it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from overhead. He reached the hall, which was a little lighter owing to the large mullioned windows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust that lay thick upon the stone, because it muffled the sound of his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the every end of the passage a door stood ajar, and a flickering light shone through the gap, casting a long sliver of gold across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There is a little more in the bottle, My Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man -- but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. Something about that voice made the sparse hairs on the back of Frank's neck stand up. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface, and then the dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair into place. He was wearing a long black cloak, and there was a bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I -- I don't know, My Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think..."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the man called Wormtail spoke again.

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," said the cold voice. "Perhaps longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Owing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the word "Quidditch," which was not a word at all.

"The -- the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?" said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) "Forgive me, but -- I do not understand -- why should we wait until the World Cup is over?"

"Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of unusual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait."

Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words "Ministry of Magic," "wizards," and "Muggles." Plainly, each of these expressions meant something secret, and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his hold on his walking stick once more, and listened more closely still.

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" Wormtail said quietly.

"Certainly I am determined, Wormtail." There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed -- and the Wormtail spoke, the words tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing himself to say this before he lost his nerve.

"It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord."

Another pause, more protracted, and then --

"Without Harry Potter?" breathed the second voice softly. "I see..."

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!" said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. "The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard -- any wizard -- the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while -- you know that I can disguise myself most effectively -- I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person --"

"I could use another wizard," said the cold voice softly, "that is true..."

"My Lord, it makes sense," said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. "Laying hands on Harry Potter would be so difficult, he is so well protected --"

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder...perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, Wormtail? Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

"My Lord! I -- I have no wish to leave you, none at all --"

"Do not lie to me!" hissed the second voice. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me..."

"No! My devotion to Your Lordship --"

"Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, My Lord --"

"Liar," breathed the second voice. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have regained under your clumsy care.

Silence!"

Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire crackling. Then the second man spoke once more, in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. *A few* more months will make no difference. As for the protection surrounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail -- courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath --"

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head -- My Lord, Bertha Jorkin's disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder --"

"If?" whispered the second voice. "*If?* If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that I could do it myself, but in my present condition...Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my *faithful* serant will have rejoined us --"

"I am a faithful servant," said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement."

"I found you," said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins."

"That is true," said the second man, sounding amused. "A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Wormtail -- though, if truth be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you?"

"I -- I thought she might be useful, My Lord --"

"Liar," said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. "However, I do not deny that her information was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform..."

"R-really, My Lord? What -- ?" Wormtail sounded terrified again.

"Ah, Wormtail, you don't want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end...but I promise you, you will have the honor of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins."

"You...you..." Wormtail's voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. "You...are going...to kill me too?"

"Wormtail, Wormtail," said the cold voice silkily, "why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing after my questioning, quite useless. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you on her holidays. Wizards who are supposed to be dead would do well not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns..."

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh -- an entirely mirthless laugh, cold as his speech.

"*We could have modified her memory?* But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her *memory* not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. The man with the cold voice had killed a woman. He was talking about it without any kind of remorse -- with *amusement*. He was dangerous -- a madman. And he was planning more murders -- this boy, Harry Potter, whoever he was -- was in danger --

Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and head straight for the telephone box in the village...but the cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listening with all his might.

"One more murder...my faithful servant at Hogwarts...Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet...I think I hear Nagini..."

And the second man's voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and spitting without drawing breath. Frank thought he must be having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed with fright.

Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he realized with a thrill of terror that it was a gigantic snake, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the thick dust on the floor, coming closer and closer -- What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where the two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was the snake would surely kill him --

But before he had made his decision, the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing; it was following the spitting, hissing noises made by the cold voice beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank's forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was continuing to hiss, and Frank was visited by a strange idea, an impossible idea...*This man could talk to snakes.*

Frank didn't understand what was going on. He wanted more than anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. The problem was that his legs didn't seem to want to move. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-indeed, My Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice, "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps and then the door of the room was flung wide open.

A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and alarm in his face.

"Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. The snake, on the other hand, was curled up on the rotting hearth rug, like some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip on his walking stick and limped over the threshold.

The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the armchair; the man inside it seemed to be even smaller than his servant, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for some sort of action, he felt braver; it had always been so in the war.

"I am calling you a Muggle," said the voice coolly. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," said Frank, his voice growing steadier. "All I know is I've heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You've done murder and you're planning more! And I'll tell you this too," he added, on a sudden inspiration, "my wife knows I'm up here, and if I don't come back --"

"You have no wife," said the cold voice, very quietly. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows...he always knows..."

"Is that right?" said Frank roughly. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, *My Lord*. Turn 'round and face me like a man, why don't you?"

"But I am not a man, Muggle," said the cold voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames. "I am much, much more than a man. However...why not? I will face you...Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper.

"You heard me, Wormtail."

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the hearth rug where the snake lay, the small man walked forward and began to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the legs of the chair snagged on its rug.

And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sitting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. He opened his mouth and let out a scream. He was screaming so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and Frank Bryce crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

CHAPTER TWO - THE SCAR

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other hand reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe, and peered into the mirror on the inside of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning-bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real...There had been two people he knew and one he didn't ...He concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember...

The dim picture of a darkened room came to him...There had been a snake on a hearth rug...a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail...and a cold, high voice...the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought...

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Voldemort had looked like, but it was impossible...All Harry knew was that at the moment when Voldemort's chair had swung around, and he, Harry, had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him...or had that been the pain in his scar?

And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground. It was all becoming confused. Harry put his face into his hands, blocking out his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his cupped hands; the details were now trickling away as fast as he tried to hold on to them...Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about someone they had killed, though Harry could not remember the name...and they had been plotting to kill someone else...*him!*

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there was an extraordinary number of unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes, and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open; Harry had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched on of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball through a fifty-foot-high hoop. Then he snapped the book shut. Even Quidditch -- in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world --

couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed *Flying with the Cannons* on his bedside table, crossed to the window, and drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look in the early hours of Saturday morning. All the curtains were closed. As far as Harry could see through the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet...and yet...Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It wasn't the pain that bothered him; Harry was no stranger to pain and injury. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. The same arm had been pierced by a venomous foot-long fang not long afterward. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborne broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents and injuries; they were unavoidable if you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been close by...But Voldemort couldn't be here, now...The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible...

Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a cloak? And then he jumped slightly as he heard his cousin Dudley give a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley, and they were plainly still asleep, their dreams untroubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot. They had explained away Harry's long absences at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They knew perfectly well that, as an underage wizard, Harry wasn't allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went wrong about the house. Harry had never been able to confide in them or tell them anything about his life in the wizarding world. The very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about his scar hurting him, and about his worries about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would not have had the lightning scar on his forehead. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents...

Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort -- the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had been gaining power steadily for eleven years -- arrived at his house and killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that had disposed of many full-grown witches and wizards in his steady rise to power -- and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort. Harry had survived with nothing but a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead, and Voldemort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinguished,

Voldemort had fled; the terror in which the secret community of witches and wizards had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had become famous.

It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more disconcerting to find out that everyone in the hidden wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. But he was used to it now: At the end of this summer, he would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at the castle again.

But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and his eye paused on the birthday cards his two best friends had sent him at the end of July. What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious.... Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I'll go and check Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions.... Maybe there's something in there about curse scars. . . ."

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the headmaster of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. Harry stared out of the window at the inky blue-black sky. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived a curse like Voldemort's; it was highly unlikely, therefore, that he would find his symptoms listed in *Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions*. As for informing the headmaster, Harry had no idea where Dumbledore went during the summer holidays. He amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full length wizard's robes, and pointed hat, stretched out on a beach somewhere, rubbing suntan lotion onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him; Harry's owl had never yet failed to deliver a letter to anyone, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed, freckled face seemed to swim before Harry, wearing a bemused expression.

"Your scar hurt? But ... but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean ... you'd know, wouldn't you? He'd be trying to do you in again, wouldn't he? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit... I'll ask Dad. . . ."

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, but he didn't have any particular expertise in the matter of curses, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn't like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, was getting jumpy about a few moments' pain. Mrs. Weasley would fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron's sixteen-year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his nerve. The Weasleys were Harry's favorite family in the world; he was hoping that they might invite him to

stay any time now (Ron had mentioned something about the Quidditch World Cup), and he somehow didn't want his visit punctuated with anxious inquiries about his scar.

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was someone like — someone like a *parent*: an adult wizard whose advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic....

And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so obvious, that he couldn't believe it had taken so long — *Sirius*.

Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, loaded his eagle-feather quill with ink, wrote *Dear Sirius*, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn't thought of Sirius straight away. But then, perhaps it wasn't so surprising — after all, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius's complete absence from Harry's life until then — Sirius had been in Azkaban, the terrifying wizard jail guarded by creatures called dementors, sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent — the murders for which he had been convicted had been committed by Wormtail, Voldemort's supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew otherwise, however; they had come face-to-face with Wormtail only the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a home once his name had been cleared. But the chance had been snatched away from him — Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had had to flee for his life. Harry had helped him escape on the back of a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had not escaped had been haunting him all summer. It had been doubly hard to return to the Dursleys knowing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry now had all his school things in his bedroom with him. The Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miserable as possible, coupled with their fear of his powers, had led them to lock his school trunk in the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Harry had a dangerous murderer for a godfather — for Harry had conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her water tray before flying off again. Harry, on the other hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius never said, in case the letters were intercepted), he was enjoying himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imagine dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight, perhaps that was why Sirius had gone South. Sirius's letters, which were now hidden beneath the highly useful loose

floorboards under Harry's bed, sounded chearful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to right now, all right...

Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when the sun had risen, when his bedroom walls had turned gold, and when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk of crumpled pieces of parchment and reread his finished letter.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window. Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me. Harry

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he was too worried. He folded up the parchment and laid it aside on his desk, ready for when Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more. Without glancing at his reflection he started to get dressed before going down to breakfast.

CHAPTER THREE – THE INVITATION

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up as he entered or sat down. Uncle Vernon's large red face was hidden behind the morning's *Daily Mail*, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over her horselike teeth.

Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying something, as he always took up an entire side of the square table by himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you are, Diddy darling," Dudley glowered at her. His life had taken a most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dudley was a very gifted boy whose teachers didn't understand him, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty

little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also skated over the accusations of bullying in the report — "He's a boisterous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia could explain away. No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's eyes — so sharp when it came to spotting fingerprints on her gleaming walls, and in observing the comings and goings of the neighbors — simply refused to see: that far from needing extra nourishment, Dudley had reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale.

So — after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia — the new regime had begun. The diet sheet that had been sent by the Smeltings school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things — fizzy drinks and cakes, chocolate bars and burgers and filled instead with fruit and vegetables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about it all, Aunt Petunia had insisted that the whole family follow the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia seemed to feel that the best way to keep up Dudley's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was not following the diet at all. The moment he had got wind of the fact that he was expected to survive the summer on carrot sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help, and they had risen to the occasion magnificently. Hedwig had returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists.) Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had obliged with a sack full of his own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking.) Mrs. Weasley, however, had sent the family owl, Errol, with an enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from the journey. And then on Harry's birthday (which the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. Harry still had two of them left, and so, looking forward to a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disapproval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

"Is this it?" he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter and was eyeing Harry's with a very sour look in his piggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his mother was occupied with the kettle, Dudley stole the rest of Uncle Vernon's grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed, and the sound of ripping paper came from the hall.

Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curiously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She didn't have to wait long to find out; after about a minute, he was back. He looked livid.

"You," he barked at Harry. "In the living room. Now."

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon out of the kitchen and into the next room. Uncle Vernon closed the door sharply behind both of them.

"So," he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him under arrest. "So."

Harry would have dearly loved to have said, "So what?" but he didn't feel that Uncle Vernon's temper should be tested this early in the morning, especially when it was already under severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for looking politely puzzled.

"This just arrived," said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. "A letter. About you."

Harry's confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by the postman?

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Arthur, has just managed to get prime tickets through his connections at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn't hosted the cup for thirty years, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him safely onto the train back to school.

It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle postman has never delivered to our house, and I am not sure he even knows where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

Molly Weasley

P.S. I do hope we've put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

"Look at this," he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley's letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it was covered in stamps except for a square inch on the front, into which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys' address in minute writing.

"She did put enough stamps on, then," said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley's was a mistake anyone could make. His uncle's eyes flashed.

"The postman noticed," he said through gritted teeth. "Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was. That's why he rang the doorbell. Seemed to think it was *funny*."

Harry didn't say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected (however distantly) with people like Mrs. Weasley.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn't do or say anything stupid, he might just be in for the treat of a lifetime. He waited for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to break the silence.

"So — can I go then?" he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon's large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on behind the mustache: a furious battle as two of Uncle Vernon's most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon had struggled against for thirteen years. On the other hand, allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys' for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than anyone could have hoped, and Uncle Vernon hated having Harry in the house. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley's letter again.

"Who is this woman?" he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

"You've seen her," said Harry. "She's my friend Ron's mother, she was meeting him off the Hog — off the school train at the end of last term."

He had almost said "Hogwarts Express," and that was a sure way to get his uncle's temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the name of Harry's school aloud in the Dursley household.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

"Dumpy sort of woman?" he growled finally. "Load of children with red hair?"

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone "dumpy," when his own son, Dudley, had finally achieved what he'd been threatening to do since the age of three, and become wider than he was tall.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

"Quidditch," he muttered under his breath. "*Quidditch* — what is this rubbish?"

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

"It's a sport," he said shortly. "Played on broom— "

"All right, all right!" said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicky. Apparently his nerves couldn't stand the sound of the word "broomsticks" in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words "send us your answer ... in the normal way." He scowled.

"What does she mean, 'the normal way'?" he spat.

"Normal for us," said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, "you know, owl post. That's what's normal for wizards."

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swearword. Shaking with anger, he shot a nervous look through the window, as though expecting to see some of the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?" he hissed, his face now a rich plum color. "You stand there, in the clothes Petunia and I have put on your ungrateful back —"

"Only after Dudley finished with them," said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had had to roll back the sleeves five times so as to be able to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

"I will not be spoken to like that!" said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn't going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of the Dursleys' stupid rules. He wasn't following Dudley's diet, and he wasn't going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep, steadying breath and then said, "Okay, I can't see the World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I've got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know — my godfather."

He had done it, he had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon's face, making it look like badly mixed black currant ice cream.

"You're — you're writing to him, are you?" said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice — but Harry had seen the pupils of his tiny eyes contract with sudden fear.

"Well — yeah," said Harry, casually. "It's been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn't he might start thinking something's wrong."

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could almost see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon's thick, dark, neatly parted hair. If he tried to stop Harry writing to Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn't go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would write and tell Sirius, who would *know* Harry was being mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle's mind as though the great mustached face were transparent. Harry tried not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible. And then —

"Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy ... this stupid ... this World Cup thing. You write and tell these — these *Weasleys* they're to pick you up, mind. I haven't got time to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your — your godfather ... tell him ... tell him you're going."

"Okay then," said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going ... he was going to the Weasleys', he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry being told off. He looked shocked to see the broad grin on Harry's face.

"That was an *excellent* breakfast, wasn't it?" said Harry. "I feel really full, don't you?"

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley's face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his bedroom.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes, and clicking her beak in the way that meant she was annoyed about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent almost at once.

"OUCH!" said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry massaged the spot furiously, looking up to see what had hit him, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, whizzing excitedly around the room like a loose firework. Harry then realized that the owl had dropped a letter at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron's handwriting, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note.

Harry — DAD GOT THE TICKETS — Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum's writing to the Muggles to ask you to stay. They might already have the letter, I don't know how fast Muggle post is. Thought I'd send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word "Pig," then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He had never seen anything that looked less like a pig. Maybe he couldn't read Ron's writing. He went back to the letter:

We're coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can't miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it's better if we pretend to ask their permission first. If they say yes, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back pronto and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work — the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't mention anything about Abroad while you're here unless you want the pants bored off you.

See you soon — Ron

"Calm down!" Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was pride at having delivered the letter to the right person. "Come here, I need you to take my answer back!"

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig's cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer.

Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:

*Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow.
Can't wait. Harry*

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl's leg as it hopped on the spot with excitement. The moment the note was secure, the owl was off again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

"Feeling up to a long journey?" he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

"Can you take this to Sirius for me?" he said, picking up his letter. "Hang on ... I just want to finish it."

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real post owl should behave.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her.

She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the open window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large chunk of birthday cake. He sat there on the floor eating it, savoring the happiness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a bright summer's day, he would be leaving Privet Drive tomorrow, his scar felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried about anything — even Lord Voldemort.

CHAPTER FOUR – BACK TO THE BURROW

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions — the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father, the broomstick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley last year. He had emptied his hiding place under the loose floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and taken down the chart on the wall counting down the days to September the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assortment of wizards was making the Dursleys uptight and irritable. Uncle Vernon had looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock the very next day.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. They'd better have the decency to put on normal clothes, that's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would call "normal." Their children might don Muggle clothing during the holidays, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered about what the neighbors would think, but he was anxious about how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry knew it was because Uncle Vernon wanted to look impressive and intimidating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not because the diet was at last taking effect, but due to fright. Dudley had emerged from his last encounter with a fully grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had had to pay for its removal at a private hospital in London. It wasn't altogether surprising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, and walking sideways from room to room, so as not to present the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia wasn't, eating anything at all. Her arms were folded, her lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at Harry.

"They'll be driving, of course?" Uncle Vernon barked across the table.

"Er," said Harry.

He hadn't thought of that. How were the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn't have a car anymore; the old Ford Anglia they had once owned was currently running wild in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same today?

"I think so," said Harry.

Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Vernon would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he tended to judge other men by how big and expensive their cars were. But Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari.

Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn't stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the net curtains every few seconds, as though there had been a warning about an escaped rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny eyes were not moving, and Harry was sure he was really listening with all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath him, clamped firmly around his bottom. Harry couldn't take the tension; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast from excitement and nerves.

But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up and down the street, then withdrew his head quickly.

"They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

I know," said Harry. "Maybe — er — the traffic's bad, or something."

Ten past five ... then a quarter past five ... Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia conversing in terse mutters in the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room. "They'll take the boy and go, there'll be no hanging around. That's if they're coming at all. Probably mistaken the day. I daresay *their kind* don't set much store by punctuality. Either that or they drive some tin-pot car that's broken d— AAAAAAAARRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, panic-stricken, across the room. Next moment Dudley came flying into the hall, looking terrified.

"What happened?" said Harry. "What's the matter?"

But Dudley didn't seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the kitchen. Harry hurried into the living room.

Loud bangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys' boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fire plugged in front of it.

"What is it?" gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. "What is it, Vernon?"

But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

"Ouch! Fred, no — go back, go back, there's been some kind of mistake — tell George not to — OUCH! George, no, there's no room, go back quickly and tell Ron—"

"Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad — maybe he'll be able to let us out—"

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear us?"

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

"What is this?" growled Uncle Vernon. "What's going on?"

"They — they've tried to get here by Floo powder," said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. "They can travel by fire — only you've blocked the fireplace — hang on —"

He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

"Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?"

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, "Shh!"

"Mr. Weasley, it's Harry ... the fireplace has been blocked up. You won't be able to get through there."

"Damn!" said Mr. Weasley's voice. "What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?"

"They've got an electric fire," Harry explained.

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley's voice excitedly. "Eclectic, you say? With a *plug*? Gracious, I must see that.... Let's think ... ouch, Ron!"

Ron's voice now joined the others'.

"What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?"

"Oh no, Ron," came Fred's voice, very sarcastically. "No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up."

"Yeah, we're having the time of our lives here," said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squashed against the wall.

"Boys, boys. . ." said Mr. Weasley vaguely. "I'm trying to think what to do.... Yes ... only way. . . Stand back, Harry."

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

"Wait a moment!" he bellowed at the fire. "What exactly are you going to —"
BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, and Ron in a cloud of rubble and loose chippings. Aunt Petunia shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, speechless, at the Weasleys, all of whom had bright red hair, including Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

"That's better," panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. "Ah — you must be Harry's aunt and uncle!"

Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away several paces, dragging Aunt Petunia. Words utterly failed Uncle Vernon. His best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he had just aged thirty years.

"Er — yes — sorry about that," said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted fireplace. "It's all my fault. It just didn't occur to me that we wouldn't be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see — just for an afternoon, you know, so we could get Harry. Muggle fireplaces aren't supposed to be connected, strictly speaking — but I've got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he fixed it for me. I can put it right in a jiffy, though, don't worry. I'll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate."

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn't understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasley, thunderstruck. Aunt Petunia staggered upright again and hid behind Uncle Vernon.

"Hello, Harry!" said Mr. Weasley brightly. "Got your trunk ready?"

"It's upstairs," said Harry, grinning back.

"We'll get it," said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry's bedroom was, having once rescued him from it in the dead of night. Harry suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

"Well," said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. "Very — erm — very nice place you've got here."

As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn't go down too well with the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon's face purpled once more, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the television and the video recorder.

"They run off eckeltricity, do they?" he said knowledgeably. "Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs," he added to Uncle Vernon. "And batteries. Got a very large collection of batteries. My wife thinks I'm mad, but there you are."

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from view, as though he thought Mr. Weasley might suddenly run at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the sounds had scared Dudley out of the kitchen. Dudley edged along the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind his mother and father. Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon's bulk, while sufficient to hide bony Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

"Yep," said Harry, "that's Dudley."

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was almost overwhelming. Dudley was still clutching his bottom as though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley's peculiar behavior. Indeed, from the tone of his voice when he next spoke, Harry was quite sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought he was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sympathy rather than fear.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry's school trunk. They glanced around as they entered and spotted Dudley. Their faces cracked into identical evil grins.

"Ah, right," said Mr. Weasley. "Better get cracking then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one.

"*Incendio!*" said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a small drawstring bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

"Off you go then, Fred," said Mr. Weasley.

"Coming," said Fred. "Oh no — hang on —"

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred's pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction — big, fat toffees in brightly colored wrappers.

Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and walked right into the fire, saying "the Burrow!" Aunt Petunia gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

"Right then, George," said Mr. Weasley, "you and the trunk."

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then, with a second whoosh, George had cried "the Burrow!" and vanished too.

"Ron, you next," said Mr. Weasley.

"See you," said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted "the Burrow!" and disappeared.

Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

"Well . . . 'bye then," Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn't say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley put out a hand and held him back. He was looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

"Harry said good-bye to you," he said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. "Honestly, I don't care."

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"You aren't going to see your nephew till next summer," he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. "Surely you're going to say good-bye?"

Uncle Vernon's face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away half his living room wall seemed to be causing him intense suffering. But Mr. Weasley's wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon's tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very resentfully, "Good-bye, then."

"See you," said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, however, a horrible gagging sound erupted behind him, and Aunt Petunia started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and he was gagging and sputtering on a foot-long, purple, slimy thing that was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley's tongue — and that a brightly colored toffee wrapper lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to wrench it out of his mouth; unsurprisingly, Dudley yelled and sputtered worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellowing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley had to shout to make himself heard.

"Not to worry, I can sort him out!" he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed worse than ever and threw herself on top of Dudley, shielding him from Mr. Weasley.

"No, really!" said Mr. Weasley desperately. "It's a simple process it was the toffee — my son Fred — real practical joker — but it's only an Engorgement Charm — at least, I think it is — please, I can correct it —"

But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic-stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging Dudley's tongue as though determined to rip it out; Dudley appeared to be suffocating under the combined pressure of his mother and his tongue; and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control completely, seized a china figure from on top of the sideboard and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

"Now really!" said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. "I'm trying to *help!*"

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up another ornament.

"Harry, go! Just go!" Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon. "I'll sort this out!"

Harry didn't want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon's second ornament narrowly missed his left ear, and on balance he thought it best to leave the situation to Mr. Weasley. He stepped into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said "the Burrow!" His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Mr. Weasley blasting a third ornament out of Uncle Vernon's hand with his wand, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley's tongue lolling around like a great slimy python. But next moment Harry had begun to spin very fast, and the Dursleys' living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

CHAPTER FIVE – WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel sick and closed his eyes. Then, when at last he felt himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward out of the Weasleys' kitchen fire.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What was it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I invented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them on all summer. . . ."

The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table with two red-haired people Harry had never seen before, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

"How're you doing, Harry?" said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook, feeling calluses and blisters under his fingers. This had to be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and Ron, who were both long and lanky. He had a broad, good-natured face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them had a large, shiny burn on it.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry's hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he worked for the wizarding bank, Gringotts, and that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about rule-breaking and fond of bossing everyone around. However, Bill was — there was no other word for it — *cool*. He was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with what looked like a fang dangling from it. Bill's clothes would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragon hide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at George's shoulder. He was looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

"That *wasn't funny* Fred!" he shouted. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

"I didn't give him anything," said Fred, with another evil grin. I just *dropped* it.... It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to."

"You dropped it on purpose!" roared Mr. Weasley. "You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet —"

"How big did his tongue get?" George asked eagerly.

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!"

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

"It *isn't funny!*" Mr. Weasley shouted. "That sort of behavior seriously undermines wizard-Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred indignantly.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George. "Isn't he, Harry?"

"Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley," said Harry earnestly.

"That's not the point!" raged Mr. Weasley. "You wait until I tell your mother —"

"Tell me what?" said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were presently narrowed with suspicion.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear," she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. "Tell me *what*, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn't really intended to tell Mrs. Weasley what had happened. There was a silence, while Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth, was Harry's and Ron's friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron's younger sister, Ginny. Both of them smiled at Harry, who grinned back, which made Ginny go scarlet — she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

"Tell me *what*, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

"It's nothing, Molly," mumbled Mr. Weasley, "Fred and George just — but I've had words with them —"

"What have they done this time?" said Mrs. Weasley. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes —"

"Why don't you show Harry where he's sleeping, Ron?" said Hermione from the doorway.

"He knows where he's sleeping," said Ron, "in my room, he slept there last —"

"We can all go," said Hermione pointedly.

"Oh," said Ron, cottoning on. "Right."

"Yeah, we'll come too," said George.

"You stay where you are!" snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories.

"What are Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?" Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn't.

"Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George's room," said Ron quietly. "Great long price lists for stuff they've invented. Joke stuff, you know. Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they'd been inventing all that . . ."

"We've been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually *making* things," said Ginny. "We thought they just liked the noise."

"Only, most of the stuff — well, all of it, really — was a bit dangerous," said Ron, "and, you know, they were planning to sell it at Hogwarts to make some money, and Mum went mad at them. Told them they weren't allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms.... She's furious at them anyway. They didn't get as many O.W.L.s as she expected."

O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

"And then there was this big row," Ginny said, "because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and they told her all they want to do is open a joke shop."

Just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

"Hi, Percy," said Harry.

"Oh hello, Harry," said Percy. "I was wondering who was making all the noise. I'm trying to work in here, you know I've got a report to finish for the office — and it's rather difficult to concentrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs."

"We're not *thundering*," said Ron irritably. "We're walking. Sorry if we've disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry of Magic."

"What are you working on?" said Harry.

"A report for the Department of International Magical Cooperation," said Percy smugly. "We're trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin — leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year —"

"That'll change the world, that report will," said Ron. "Front page of the *Daily Prophet*, I expect, cauldron leaks."

Percy went slightly pink.

"You might sneer, Ron," he said heatedly, "but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow—bottomed products that seriously endanger —"

"Yeah, yeah, all right," said Ron, and he started off upstairs again. Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermione, and Ginny followed Ron up three more flights of stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the toffees.

The room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the same posters of Ron's favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the windowsill, which had previously held frog spawn, now contained one extremely large frog. Ron's old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron's letter to Harry in Privet Drive. It was hopping up and down in a small cage and twittering madly.

"Shut *up*, Pig," said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. "Fred and George are in here with us, because Bill and Charlie are in their room," he told Harry. "Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he's got to *work*."

"Er — why are you calling that owl Pig?" Harry asked Ron.

"Because he's being stupid," said Ginny, "Its proper name is Pigwidgeon."

"Yeah, and that's not a stupid name at all," said Ron sarcastically. "Ginny named him," he explained to Harry. "She reckons it's sweet. And I tried to change it, but it was too late, he won't answer to anything else. So now he's Pig. I've got to keep him up here because he annoys Errol and Hermes. He annoys me too, come to that.

Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had moaned continually about his old rat, Scabbers, but had been most upset when Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have eaten him.

"Where's Crookshanks?" Harry asked Hermione now.

"Out in the garden, I expect," she said. "He likes chasing gnomes. He's never seen any before."

"Percy's enjoying work, then?" said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zooming in and out of the posters on the ceiling.

"Enjoying it?" said Ron darkly. "I don't reckon he'd come home if Dad didn't make him. He's obsessed. Just don't get him onto the subject of his boss. *According to Mr. Crouch ... as I was saying to Mr. Crouch ... Mr. Crouch is of the opinion ... Mr. Crouch was telling me ...* They'll be announcing their engagement any day now."

"Have you had a good summer, Harry?" said Hermione. "Did you get our food parcels and everything?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot," said Harry. "They saved my life, those cakes.

"And have you heard from —?" Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask about Sirius. Ron and Hermione had been so deeply involved in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry's godfather as he was. However, discussing him in front of Ginny was a bad idea. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

"I think they've stopped arguing," said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curiously from Ron to Harry. "Shall we go down and help your mum with dinner?"

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. The four of them left Ron's room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen, looking extremely bad-tempered.

"We're eating out in the garden," she said when they came in. "There's just not room for eleven people in here. Could you take the plates outside, girls? Bill and Charlie are setting up the tables. Knives and forks, please, you two," she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously than she had intended at a pile of potatoes in the sink, which shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

"Oh for heaven's *sake*," she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started skating across the floor, scooping up the potatoes. "Those two!" she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. I don't know what's going to happen to them, I

really don't. No ambition, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can...."

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around inside it. A creamy sauce poured from the wand tip as she stirred.

"It's not as though they haven't got brains, she continued irritably, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it with a further poke of her wand, "but they're wasting them, and unless they pull themselves together soon, they'll be in real trouble. I've had more owls from Hogwarts about them than the rest put together. If they carry on the way they're going, they'll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as several knives soared out of it, flew across the kitchen, and began chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

"I don't know where we went wrong with them," said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out still more saucepans. "It's been the same for years, one thing after another, and they won't listen to — OH NOT *AGAIN!*"

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

"One of their fake wands again!" she shouted. "How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?"

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

"C'mon," Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cutlery from the open drawer, "let's go and help Bill and Charlie."

They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard.

They had only gone a few paces when Hermione's bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden, bottle-brush tail held high in the air, chasing what looked like a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered very fast as it sprinted across the yard and dived headlong into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks inserted a paw into the boot, trying to reach it. Meanwhile, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the commotion was revealed as they entered the garden, and saw that Bill and Charlie both had their wands out, and were making two battered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each attempting to knock the other's out of the air. Fred and George were cheering, Ginny was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn between amusement and anxiety.

Bill's table caught Charlie's with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and they all looked up to see Percy's head poking out of a window on the second floor.

"Will you keep it down?!" he bellowed.

"Sorry, Perce," said Bill, grinning. "How're the cauldron bottoms coming on?"

"Very badly," said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut.

Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables safely onto the grass, end to end, and then,

with a flick of his wand, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o'clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking, and the nine Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were settling themselves down to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, this was paradise, and at first, Harry listened rather than talked as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

"I've told Mr. Crouch that I'll have it ready by Tuesday," Percy was saying pompously. "That's a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep on top of things. I think he'll be grateful I've done it in good time, I mean, its extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the World Cup. We're just not getting the support we need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman —"

"I like Ludo," said Mr. Weasley mildly. "He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble — a lawnmower with unnatural powers — I smoothed the whole thing over."

"Oh Bagman's *likable* enough, of course," said Percy dismissively, "but how he ever got to be Head of Department ... when I compare him to Mr. Crouch! I can't see Mr. Crouch losing a member of our department and not trying to find out what's happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now? Went on holiday to Albania and never came back?"

"Yes, I was asking Ludo about that," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "He says Bertha's gotten lost plenty of times before now — though must say, if it was someone in my department, I'd be worried. . . ."

"Oh Bertha's *hopeless*, all right," said Percy. "I hear she's been shunted from department to department for years, much more trouble than she's worth ... but all the same, Bagman ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time, you know, and I think Mr. Crouch was quite fond of her — but Bagman just keeps laughing and saying she probably misread the map and ended up in Australia instead of Albania. However" — Percy heaved an impressive sigh and took a deep swig of elderflower wine — "we've got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation without trying to find members of other departments too. As you know, we've got another big event to organize right after the World Cup."

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. "*You* know the one I'm talking about, Father." He raised his voice slightly. "The top-secret one."

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, "He's been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since he started work. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons."

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

". . . with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?"

"Mum, no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure," said Bill patiently.

"And your hair's getting silly, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly. "I wish you'd let me give it a trim. . . ."

"I like it," said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. "You're so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it's nowhere near as long as Professor Dumbledore's...."

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

"It's got to be Ireland," said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. "They flattened Peru in the semifinals."

"Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though," said Fred.

"Krum's one decent player, Ireland has got seven," said Charlie shortly. "I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing, that was."

"What happened?" said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the wizarding world when he was stuck on Privet Drive.

"Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten," said Charlie gloomily. "Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Luxembourg."

Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best racing brooms in the world, a Firebolt. Flying came more naturally to Harry than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team.

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream, and by the time they had finished, moths were fluttering low over the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and honeysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well fed and at peace with the world as he watched several gnomes sprinting through the rosebushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry, "So — *have* you heard from Sirius lately?"

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

"Yeah," said Harry softly, "twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I'm here."

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting again, and about the dream that had awoken him ... but he really didn't want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

"Look at the time," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. "You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you you'll be up at the crack of dawn to get to the Cup. Harry, if you leave your school list out, I'll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I'm getting everyone else's. There might not be time after the World Cup, the match went on for five days last time."

"Wow — hope it does this time!" said Harry enthusiastically.

"Well, I certainly don't," said Percy sanctimoniously. "I *shudder* to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was away from work for five days."

"Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?" said Fred.

"That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!" said Percy, going very red in the face. "It was nothing *personal*!"

"It was," Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. "We sent it."

CHAPTER SIX – THE PORTKEY

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to sleep in Ron's room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

"Time to go, Harry, dear," she whispered, moving away to wake Ron.

Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his mother roused him. At the foot of Harry's mattress he saw two large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

"S' time already?" said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove, while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking a sheaf of large parchment tickets. He looked up as the boys entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a golfing sweater and a very old pair of jeans, slightly too big for him and held up with a thick leather belt.

"What d'you think?" he asked anxiously. "We're supposed to go incognito — do I look like a Muggle, Harry?"

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling, "very good."

"Where're Bill and Charlie and Per—Per—Percy?" said George, failing to stifle a huge yawn.

"Well, they're Apparating, aren't they?" said Mrs. Weasley, heaving the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge into bowls. "So they can have a bit of a lie-in."

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but had never known any Hogwarts student to do it, and understood that it was very difficult.

"So they're still in bed?" said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "And where have those girls got to?"

She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

"You have to pass a test to Apparate?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. It's not easy, Apparition, and when it's not done properly it can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er — *splinched*?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move

either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind....."

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition. There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms — slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time. Apparated five miles south of where he meant to, right on top of some poor old dear doing her shopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove he can."

There were footsteps down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and drowsy.

"Why do we have to be up so early?" Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

"We've got a bit of a walk," said Mr. Weasley.

"Walk?" said Harry. "What, are we walking to the World Cup?"

"No, no, that's miles away," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup..."

"George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

"What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

"What is that in your pocket?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't you lie to me!"

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "*Accio!*"

Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand.

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!"

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all.

"*Accio! Accio! Accio!*" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she kissed Mr. Weasley on the cheek, though not nearly as much as the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and behave yourselves," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but they did not look back or answer. "I'll send Bill, Charlie, and Percy along around midday," Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off across the dark yard after Fred and George.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was drawing closer. Harry, having been thinking about thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

"So how *does* everyone get there without all the Muggles noticing?" he asked.

"It's been a massive organizational problem," sighed Mr. Weasley. "The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup, and of course, we just haven't got a magical site big enough to accommodate them all. There are places Muggles can't penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand wizards into Diagon Alley or platform nine and three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The whole Ministry's been working on it for months. First, of course, we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number use Muggle transport, but we can't have too many clogging up their buses and trains — remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to set up safe points for them to appear, well away from Muggles. I believe there's a handy wood they're using as the Apparition point. For those who don't want to Apparate, or can't, we use Portkeys. They're objects that are used to transport wizards from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been two hundred Portkeys placed at strategic points around Britain, and the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that's where we're headed."

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What sort of objects are Portkeys?" said Harry curiously.

"Well, they can be anything," said Mr. Weasley. "Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don't go picking them up and playing with them ... stuff they'll just think is litter...."

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened very slowly as they made their way through the village, its inky blackness diluting to deepest blue. Harry's hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn't have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden rabbit holes, slipping on thick black tufts of grass. Each breath Harry took was sharp in his chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

"Whew," panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. "Well, we've made good time — we've got ten minutes."

Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side.

"Now we just need the Portkey," said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. "It won't be big.... Come on..."

They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air.

"Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we've got it."

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

"Amos!" said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking old boot in his other hand.

"This is Amos Diggory, everyone," said Mr. Weasley. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?"

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff House Quidditch team at Hogwarts.

"Hi," said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating their team, Gryffindor, in the first Quidditch match of the previous year.

"Long walk, Arthur?" Cedric's father asked. "Not too bad," said Mr. Weasley. "We live just on the other side of the village there. You?"

"Had to get up at two, didn't we, Ced? I tell you, I'll be glad when he's got his Apparition test. Still ... not complaining ... Quidditch World Cup, wouldn't miss it for a sackful of Galleons — and the tickets cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. . . ." Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly around at the three Weasley boys, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. "All these yours, Arthur?"

"Oh no, only the redheads," said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. "This is Hermione, friend of Ron's — and Harry, another friend —"

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Harry? Harry *Potter*?"

"Er — yeah," said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to the lightning scar on his forehead, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

"Ced's talked about you, of course," said Amos Diggory. "Told us all about playing against you last year... I said to him, I said — Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will.... *You beat Harry Potter!*"

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked slightly embarrassed.

"Harry fell off his broom, Dad," he muttered. I told you ... it was an accident...."

"Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?" roared Amos genially, slapping his son on his back. "Always modest, our Ced, always the gentleman ... but the best man won, I'm

sure Harry'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!"

"Must be nearly time," said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. "Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?"

"No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?"

"Not that I know of," said Mr. Weasley. "Yes, it's a minute off ... We'd better get ready...."

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

"You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do —"

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry how odd this would look if a Muggle were to walk up here now ... nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting....

"Three. . ." muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, two. . . one. . ."

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground; he could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling color; his forefinger was stuck to the boot as though it was pulling him magnetically onward and then —

His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head with a heavy thud.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

"Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill," said a voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN – BAGMAN AND CROUCH

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

"Morning, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used Portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

"Hello there, Arthur," said Basil wearily. "Not on duty, eh? It's all right for some.... We've been here all night.... You'd better get out of the way, we've got a big party coming in from the Black Forest at five fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsite.... Weasley ... Weasley...." He consulted his parchment list. "About a quarter of a mile's walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts. Diggory ... second field ... ask for Mr. Payne."

"Thanks, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon. They said good-bye to the Diggorys and approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle for several acres. When he heard their footsteps, he turned his head to look at them.

"Morning!" said Mr. Weasley brightly.

"Morning," said the Muggle.

"Would you be Mr. Roberts?"

"Aye, I would," said Mr. Roberts. "And who're you?"

"Weasley — two tents, booked a couple of days ago?"

"Aye," said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door. "You've got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night?"

"That's it," said Mr. Weasley.

"You'll be paying now, then?" said Mr. Roberts.

"Ah — right — certainly —" said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry toward him. "Help me, Harry," he muttered, pulling a roll of Muggle money from his pocket and starting to peel the notes apart. "This one's a — a — a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on it now... So this is a five?"

"A twenty," Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfortably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

"Ah yes, so it is.... I don't know, these little bits of paper..."

"You foreign?" said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

"Foreign?" repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

"You're not the first one who's had trouble with money," said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. "I had two try and pay me with great gold coins the size of hubcaps ten minutes ago."

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

"Never been this crowded," he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up...."

"Is that right?" said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn't give it to him.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? There's a bloke walking 'round in a kilt and a poncho."

"Shouldn't he?" said Mr. Weasley anxiously

"It's like some sort of... I dunno ... like some sort of rally," said Mr. Roberts.

"They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next to Mr. Roberts's front door.

"*Obliviate!*" he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts's eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a look of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. Harry recognized the symptoms of one who had just had his memory modified.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. "And your change."

"Thanks very much," said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He looked exhausted: His chin was blue with stubble and there were deep purple shadows under his eyes. Once out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, "Been having a lot of trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm ten times a day to keep him happy. And Ludo Bagman's not helping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security Blimey, I'll be glad when this is over. See you later, Arthur."

He Disappeared.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better than to talk about Bludgers near Muggles, shouldn't he?"

"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a bit ... well . . . *lax* about security. You couldn't wish for a more enthusiastic head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he was the best Beater the Wimbourne Wasps ever had."

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised that Mr. Roberts was getting suspicious. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

"Always the same," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We can't resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look, this is us."

They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hammered into the ground that read WEEZLY.

"Couldn't have a better spot!" said Mr. Weasley happily. "The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we're as close as we could be." He hoisted his backpack from his shoulders. "Right," he said excitedly, "no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we're out in these numbers on Muggle land. We'll be putting these tents up by hand! Shouldn't be too difficult.... Muggles do it all the time.... Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?"

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him with Mrs. Figg, an old neighbor. However, he and Hermione worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was more of a hindrance than a help, because he got thoroughly overexcited

when it came to using the mallet, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents.

All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards, Harry thought, but the trouble was that once Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave Harry a quizzical look as Mr. Weasley dropped to his hands and knees and entered the first tent.

"We'll be a bit cramped," he called, "but I think we'll all squeeze in. Come and have a look."

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned, three room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen. Oddly enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg's house: There were crocheted covers on the mismatched chairs and a strong smell of cats.

"Well, it's not for long," said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds that stood in the bedroom. I borrowed this from Perkins at the office. Doesn't camp much anymore, poor fellow, he's got lumbago."

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. "We'll need water...."

"There's a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us," said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed completely unimpressed by its extraordinary inner proportions. "It's on the other side of the field."

"Well, why don't you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then" — Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans — "and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire?"

"But we've got an oven," said Ron. "Why can't we just —"

"Ron, anti-Muggle security!" said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. "When real Muggles camp, they cook on fires outdoors. I've seen them at it!"

After a quick tour of the girls' tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys', though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off across the campsite with the kettle and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. They made their way slowly through the rows, staring eagerly around. It was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never really thought much about those in other countries.

Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen witches and wizards this young before. A tiny boy no older than two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass, which was swelling slowly to the size of a salami. As they drew level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

"How many times, Kevin? You *don't* — touch — Daddy's — wand — yecchh! "

She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little boy's yells — "You bust slug! You bust slug!"

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose only high enough for the girls' toes to skim the

dewy grass. A Ministry wizard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, "In broad daylight! Parents having a lie-in, I suppose —"

Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with furtive looks around them, conjured fires with their wands; others were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn't work. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: THE SALEM WITCHES' INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn't understand a word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

"Er — is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?" said Ron.

It wasn't just Ron's eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind them, they heard their names.

"Harry! Ron! Hermione!"

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent, with a sandy-haired woman who had to be his mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

"Like the decorations?" said Seamus, grinning. "The Ministry's not too happy."

"Ah, why shouldn't we show our colors?" said Mrs. Finnigan. "You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over *their* tents. You'll be supporting Ireland, of course?" she added, eyeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, they set off again, though, as Ron said, "Like we'd say anything else surrounded by that lot." I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?" said Hermione.

"Let's go and have a look," said Harry, pointing to a large patch of tents upfield, where the Bulgarian flag — white, green, and red — was fluttering in the breeze.

The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

"Krum," said Ron quietly.

"What?" said Hermione.

"Krum!" said Ron. "Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker!"

"He looks really grumpy," said Hermione, looking around at the many Krums blinking and scowling at them.

"Really grumpy?" Ron raised his eyes to the heavens. "Who cares what he looks like? He's unbelievable. He's really young too. Only just eighteen or something. He's a genius, you wait until tonight, you'll see."

There was already a small queue for the tap in the corner of the field. Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined it, right behind a pair of men who were having a heated argument. One of them was a very old wizard who was wearing a long flowery nightgown. The

other was clearly a Ministry wizard; he was holding out a pair of pinstriped trousers and almost crying with exasperation.

"Just put them on, Archie, there's a good chap. You can't walk around like that, the Muggle at the gate's already getting suspicious —

I bought this in a Muggle shop," said the old wizard stubbornly. "Muggles wear them."

"Muggle *women* wear them, Archie, not the men, they wear *these*," said the Ministry wizard, and he brandished the pinstriped trousers.

"I'm not putting them on," said old Archie in indignation. "I like a healthy breeze 'round my privates, thanks."

Hermione was overcome with such a strong fit of the giggles at this point that she had to duck out of the queue and only returned when Archie had collected his water and moved away.

Walking more slowly now, because of the weight of the water, they made their way back through the campsite. Here and there, they saw more familiar faces: other Hogwarts students with their families. Oliver Wood, the old captain of Harry's House Quidditch team, who had just left Hogwarts, dragged Harry over to his parents' tent to introduce him, and told him excitedly that he had just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team. Next they were hailed by Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff fourth year, and a little farther on they saw Cho Chang, a very pretty girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw team. She waved and smiled at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. More to stop Ron from smirking than anything, Harry hurriedly pointed out a large group of teenagers whom he had never seen before.

"Who d'you reckon they are?" he said. "They don't go to Hogwarts, do they?"

"Spect they go to some foreign school," said Ron. "I know there are others. Never met anyone who went to one, though. Bill had a penfriend at a school in Brazil ... this was years and years ago ... and he wanted to go on an exchange trip but Mum and Dad couldn't afford it. His penfriend got all offended when he said he wasn't going and sent him a cursed hat. It made his ears shrivel up."

Harry laughed but didn't voice the amazement he felt at hearing about other wizarding schools. He supposed, now that he saw representatives of so many nationalities in the campsite, that he had been stupid never to realize that Hogwarts couldn't be the only one. He glanced at Hermione, who looked utterly unsurprised by the information. No doubt she had run across the news about other wizarding schools in some book or other.

"You've been ages," said George when they finally got back to the Weasleys' tents.

"Met a few people," said Ron, setting the water down. "You've not got that fire started yet?"

"Dad's having fun with the matches," said Fred.

Mr. Weasley was having no success at all in lighting the fire, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Splintered matches littered the ground around him, but he looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"Oops!" he said as he managed to light a match and promptly dropped it in surprise.

"Come here, Mr. Weasley," said Hermione kindly, taking the box from him, and showing him how to do it properly.

At last they got the fire lit, though it was at least another hour before it was hot enough to cook anything. There was plenty to watch while they waited, however. Their tent seemed to be pitched right alongside a kind of thoroughfare to the field, and Ministry members kept hurrying up and down it, greeting Mr. Weasley cordially as they passed. Mr. Weasley kept up a running commentary, mainly for Harry's and Hermione's benefit; his own children knew too much about the Ministry to be greatly interested.

"*That* was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office.... Here comes Gilbert Wimple; he's with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he's had those horns for a while now... Hello, Arnie ... Arnold Peasegood, he's an Obliviator — member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know... and that's Bode and Croaker ... they're Unspeakables...."

"They're what?"

"From the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to...."

At last, the fire was ready, and they had just started cooking eggs and sausages when Bill, Charlie, and Percy came strolling out of the woods toward them.

"Just Apparated, Dad," said Percy loudly. "Ah, excellent, lunch!"

They were halfway through their plates of eggs and sausages when Mr. Weasley jumped to his feet, waving and grinning at a man who was striding toward them. "Aha!" he said. "The man of the moment! Ludo!"

Ludo Bagman was easily the most noticeable person Harry had seen so far, even including old Archie in his flowered nightdress. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black. An enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly he surely had not had in the days when he had played Quidditch for England. His nose was squashed (probably broken by a stray Bludger, Harry thought), but his round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like a very overgrown schoolboy.

"Ahoy there!" Bagman called happily. He was walking as though he had springs attached to the balls of his feet and was plainly in a state of wild excitement.

"Arthur, old man," he puffed as he reached the campfire, "what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming ... and hardly a hiccough in the arrangements.... Not much for me to do!"

Behind him, a group of haggard-looking Ministry wizards rushed past, pointing at the distant evidence of some sort of a magical fire that was sending violet sparks twenty feet into the air.

Percy hurried forward with his hand outstretched. Apparently his disapproval of the way Ludo Bagman ran his department did not prevent him from wanting to make a good impression.

"Ah — yes," said Mr. Weasley, grinning, "this is my son Percy. He's just started at the Ministry — and this is Fred — no, George, sorry — *that's* Fred — Bill, Charlie, Ron — my daughter, Ginny and Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry's name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick upward to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Everyone," Mr. Weasley continued, "this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it's thanks to him we've got such good tickets —"

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

"Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?" he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pockets of his yellow-and-black robes. "I've already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first — I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland's front three are the strongest I've seen in years — and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a weeklong match."

"Oh ... go on then," said Mr. Weasley. "Let's see ... a Galleon on Ireland to win?"

"A Galleon?" Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. "Very well, very well ... any other takers?"

"They're a bit young to be gambling," said Mr. Weasley. "Molly wouldn't like —"

"We'll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts," said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money, "that Ireland wins — but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we'll throw in a fake wand."

"You don't want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that," Percy hissed, but Bagman didn't seem to think the wand was rubbish at all; on the contrary, his boyish face shone with excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman roared with laughter.

"Excellent! I haven't seen one that convincing in years! I'd pay five Galleons for that!"

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

"Boys," said Mr. Weasley under his breath, "I don't want you betting.... That's all your savings Your mother —"

"Don't be a spoilsport, Arthur!" boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. "They're old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum'll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance.... I'll give you excellent odds on that one We'll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we...."

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the twins' names.

"Cheers," said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away into the front of his robes. Bagman turned most cheerfully back to Mr. Weasley.

"Couldn't do me a brew, I suppose? I'm keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number's making difficulties, and I can't understand a word he's saying. Barty'll be able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff disapproval and positively writhing with excitement. "He speaks over two hundred! Mermish and Gobbledegook and Troll. . ."

"Anyone can speak Troll," said Fred dismissively. "All you have to do is point and grunt."

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

"Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?" Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them all.

"Not a dicky bird," said Bagman comfortably. "But she'll turn up. Poor old Bertha ... memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction. Lost, you take my word for it. She'll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed Bagman his tea.

"Barty Crouch keeps saying that," said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, "but we really can't spare anyone at the moment. Oh — talk of the devil! Barty!"

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, sprawled on the grass in his old Wasp robes. Barty Crouch was a stiff, upright, elderly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnaturally straight, and his narrow toothbrush mustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized him. Percy was a great believer in rigidly following rules, and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a bank manager; Harry doubted even Uncle Vernon would have spotted him for what he really was.

"Pull up a bit of grass, Barry," said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

"No thank you, Ludo," said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting we add another twelve seats to the Top Box."

"Oh is *that* what they're after?" said Bagman. I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent."

"Mr. Crouch!" said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of halfbow that made him look like a hunchback. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh," said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. "Yes — thank you, Weatherby."

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

"Oh and I've been wanting a word with you too, Arthur," said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. "Ali Bashir's on the warpath. He wants a word with you about your embargo on flying carpets."

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

"I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I've told him once I've told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as a Muggle Artifact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. "He's desperate to export here."

"Well, they'll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?" said Bagman.

"Ali thinks there's a niche in the market for a family vehicle, said Mr. Crouch. "I remember my grandfather had an Axminster that could seat twelve — but that was before carpets were banned, of course."

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

"So, been keeping busy, Barty?" said Bagman breezily.

"Fairly," said Mr. Crouch dryly. "Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo."

"I expect you'll both be glad when this is over?" said Mr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

"Glad! Don't know when I've had more fun.... Still, it's not as though we haven't got anything to look forward to, eh, Barty? Eh? Plenty left to organize, eh?"

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

"We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details —"

"Oh details!" said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges.

"They've signed, haven't they? They've agreed, haven't they? I bet you anything these kids'll know soon enough anyway. I mean, it's happening at Hogwarts —"

"Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know," said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman's remarks short. "Thank you for the tea, Weatherby."

He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his tea, the gold in his pockets chinking merrily.

"See you all later!" he said. "You'll be up in the Top Box with me — I'm commentating!" He waved, Barty Crouch nodded curtly, and both of them Disapparated.

"What's happening at Hogwarts, Dad?" said Fred at once. "What were they talking about?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said Mr. Weasley, smiling.

"It's classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides to release it," said Percy stiffly. "Mr. Crouch was quite right not to disclose it."

"Oh shut up, Weatherby," said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretence disappeared: the Ministry seemed to have bowed to the inevitable and stopped fighting the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere.

Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were luminous rosettes — green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria — which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

"Been saving my pocket money all summer for this," Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the salesmen, buying souvenirs. Though Ron purchased a dancing shamrock hat and a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum walked backward and forward over Ron's hand, scowling up at the green rosette above him.

"Wow, look at these!" said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

"Omnioculars," said the saleswizard eagerly. "You can replay action ... slow everything down ... and they flash up a play-by- play breakdown if you need it. Bargain — ten Galleons each."

"Wish I hadn't bought this now," said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

"Three pairs," said Harry firmly to the wizard.

"No — don't bother," said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that Harry, who had inherited a small fortune from his parents, had much more money than he did.

"You won't be getting anything for Christmas," Harry told him, thrusting Omnioculars into his and Hermione's hands. "For about ten years, mind."

"Fair enough," said Ron, grinning.

"Oooh, thanks, Harry," said Hermione. "And I'll get us some programs, look —"

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green rosettes too, and Mr. Weasley was carrying an Irish flag. Fred and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

"It's time!" said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. "Come on, let's go!"

CHAPTER EIGHT – THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grinning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hundred have been working on it all year. Muggle Repelling Charms on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered urgent appointments and had to dash away again ... bless them," he added fondly, leading the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards.

"Prime seats!" said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. "Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur, and as high as you can go."

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Mr. Weasley's party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family — safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burgler Buzzer ... Mrs. Shower's All Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain! ... Gladrags Wizardwear — London, Paris, Hogsmeade...

Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. So far it was empty, except for a tiny creature sitting in the second from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of it on the chair, was wearing a tea towel draped like a toga, and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar....

"Dobby?" said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a large tomato. It wasn't Dobby — it was, however, unmistakably a house-elf, as Harry's friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family.

"Did sir just call me Dobby?" squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby's had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf — that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione spun around in their seats to look. Though they had heard a lot about Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.

"Sorry," Harry told the elf, "I just thought you were someone I knew."

"But I knows Dobby too, sir!" squeaked the elf. She was shielding her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top Box was not brightly lit. "My name is Winky, sir — and you, sir —" Her dark brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry's scar. "You is surely Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry.

"But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!" s he said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.

"How is he?" said Harry. "How's freedom suiting him?"

"Ah, sir," said Winky, shaking her head, "ah sir, meaning no disrespect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir, when you is setting him free."

"Why?" said Harry, taken aback. "What's wrong with him?"

"Freedom is going to Dobby's head, sir, " said Winky sadly. "Ideas above his station, sir. Can't get another position, sir."

"Why not?" said Harry.

Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, "*He is wanting paying for his work, sir.*"

"Paying?" said Harry blankly. "Well — why shouldn't he be paid?"

Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her face was half-hidden again.

"House-elves is not paid, sir!" she said in a muffled squeak. "No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice family and settle down, Dobby. He is getting up to all sorts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this, Dobby, I says, and next thing I hear you's up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."

"Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.

"House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter," said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. "House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at all, Harry Potter" — she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped — "but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir."

"Why's he sent you up here, if he knows you don't like heights?" said Harry, frowning.

"Master — master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy," said Winky, tilting her head toward the empty space beside her. "Winky is wishing she is back in master's tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf."

She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the others.

"So that's a house-elf?" Ron muttered. "Weird things, aren't they?"

"Dobby was weirder," said Harry fervently.

Ron pulled out his Omnioculars and started testing them, staring down into the crowd on the other side of the stadium.

"Wild!" he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. "I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again ... and again ... and again. . ."

Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvetcovered, tasseled program.

"A display from the team mascots will precede the match," she read aloud.

"Oh that's always worth watching," said Mr. Weasley. "National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show."

The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were obviously very important wizards. Percy jumped to his feet so often that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, arrived, Percy bowed so low that his glasses fell off and shattered. Highly embarrassed, he repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks at Harry, whom Cornelius Fudge had greeted like an old friend. They had met before, and Fudge shook Harry's hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and introduced him to the wizards on either side of him.

"Harry Potter, you know," he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn't seem to understand

a word of English. "*Harry Potter* ... oh come on now, you know who he is ... the boy who survived You-Know-Who ... you *do* know who he is —"

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Harry. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. Ah, I see his house-elf's saving him a seat.... Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places ... ah, and here's Lucius!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none other than Dobby the house-elf's former owners: Lucius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.

Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed face and white-blond hair, Draco greatly resembled his father. His mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk - Obalonsk - Mr. - well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else - you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they had come face-to-face: It had been in Flourish and Blotts' bookshop, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.

"Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a *very* generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

"How - how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

Mr. Malfoy's eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry knew exactly what was making Mr. Malfoy's lip curl like that. The Malfoys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they considered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermione, second-class. However, under the gaze of the Minister of Magic, Mr. Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Draco shot Harry, Ron, and Hermione one contemptuous look, then settled himself between his mother and father.

"Slimy gits," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman charged into the box.

"Everyone ready?" he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. "Minister - ready to go?"

“Ready when you are, Ludo,” said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said “*Sonorus!*” and then spoke over the roar of sound that was now filling the packed stadium; his voice echoed over them, booming into every corner of the stands.

“Ladies and gentlemen. . . welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (*Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans – A Risk With Every Mouthful!*) and now showed **BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.**

“And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce. . . the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!”

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

“I wonder what they’ve brought,” said Mr. Weasley, leaning forward in his seat. “Aaah!” He suddenly whipped off his glasses and polished them hurriedly on his robes. “*Veela!*”

“What are veel –?”

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry’s question was answered for him. Veela were women. . . the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen. . . except that they weren’t - they couldn’t be - human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind. . . but then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human - in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry’s mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen.

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry’s dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea. . . but would it be good enough?

“Harry, what *are* you doing?” said Hermione’s voice from a long way off.

The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he were about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn’t want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course, be supporting Bulgaria, and he wondered vaguely why he had a large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absentmindedly shredding the shamrocks on his hat. Mr. Weasley, smiling slightly, leaned over to Ron and tugged the hat out of his hands.

“You’ll be wanting that,” he said, “once Ireland have had their say.”

“Huh?” said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. “*Honestly!*” she said.

“And now,” roared Ludo Bagman’s voice, “kindly put your wands in the air. . . for the Irish National Team Mascots!”

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it - “Excellent!” yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

“Leprechauns!” said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

“There you go,” Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry’s hand, “for the Omnioculars! Now you’ve got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!”

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome - the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you - Dimitrov!”

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

“Ivanova!”

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

“Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand - *Krum!*”

“That’s him, that’s him!” yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omnioculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an overgrown bird of prey. It was hard to believe he was only eighteen.

“And now, please greet - the Irish National Quidditch Team!” yelled Bagman. “Presenting - Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand - *Lynch!*”

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word “Firebolt” on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

“And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!”

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon’s, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large

wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omnioculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open - four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

“Theeeeeeeey’re OFF!” screamed Bagman. “And it’s Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!”

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible - the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

HAWKSHEAD ATTACKING FORMATION, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bulgarians. *PORSKOFF PLOY* flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran’s path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it - “TROY SCORES!” roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. “Ten zero to Ireland!”

“What?” Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars. “But Levski’s got the Quaffle!”

“Harry, if you’re not going to watch at normal speed, you’re going to miss things!” shouted Hermione, who was dancing up and down, waving her arms in the air while Troy did a lap of honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their movements so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another’s minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry’s chest kept squeaking their names: “*Troy - Mullet - Mo ran!*” And within ten minutes, Ireland had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a

thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters.

The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova - oh I say!" roared Bagman.

One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was –

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry.

She was half right - at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the stadium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"Fool!" moaned Mr. Weasley. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be okay, he only got ploughed!" Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking horror-struck. "Which is what Krum was after, of course... ."

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes.

He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. *WRONSKI DEFENSIVE FEINT - DANGEROUS SEEKER DIVERSION* read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum's face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood - Krum hadn't seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being revived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for

the Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goal posts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for clobbering -- excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And - yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted together to form the words "HA, HA, HA!" The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

"Now, we can't have that!" said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" said Bagman's voice. "Now *there's* something we haven't seen before. . . . Oh this could turn nasty. . . ."

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words "HEE, HEE, HEE." Mostafa was not

impressed by the Bulgarians' arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. "And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms. . . yes. . . there they go. . . and Troy takes the Quaffle. .

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

"Foul!" roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

"Foul!" echoed Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice. "Dimitrov skins Moran - deliberately flying to collide there - and it's got to be another penalty - yes, there's the whistle!"

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn't look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders –

"And *that*, boys," yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, "is why you should never go for looks alone!"

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffle changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

"Levski - Dimitrov - Moran - Troy - Mullet - Ivanova - Moran again - Moran - MORAN SCORES!"

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members' wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov -

The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum's nose looked broken, there

was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn't blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn't blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Ron obviously felt the same.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him -"

"Look at Lynch!" Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing...

"He's seen the Snitch!" Harry shouted. "He's seen it! Look at him go!"

Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on. . . but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again -

"They're going to crash!" shrieked Hermione.

"They're not!" roared Ron.

"Lynch is!" yelled Harry.

And he was right - for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stamped by a horde of angry veela.

"The Snitch, where's the Snitch?" bellowed Charlie, along the row.

"He's got it - Krum's got it - it's all over!" shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was rising gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170 across the crowd, who didn't seem to have realized what had happened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

"IRELAND WINS!" Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match.

"KRUM GETS THE SNITCH - BUT IRELAND WINS -- good lord, I don't think any of us were expecting that!"

"What did he catch the Snitch for?" Ron bellowed, even as he jumped up and down, applauding with his hands over his head. "He ended it when Ireland were a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!"

"He knew they were never going to catch up!" Harry shouted back over all the noise, also applauding loudly. "The Irish Chasers were too good. . . . He wanted to end it on his terms, that's all. . . ."

"He was very brave, wasn't he?" Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum

land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. "He looks a terrible mess. . ."

Harry put his Omnioculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming delightedly all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, surrounded by mediwizards. He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrinking back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

"Vell, ve fought bravely," said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

"You can speak English!" said Fudge, sounding outraged. "And you've been letting me mime everything all day!"

"Veil, it vos very funny," said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging.

"And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!" roared Bagman.

Harry's eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very disgruntled that he'd been using sign language all day for nothing.

"Let's have a really loud hand for the gallant losers - Bulgaria!" Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgarian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectacularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being supported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.

At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Confolly's, clutching hard around his waist

and still grinning in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "*Quietus.*"

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that. . . . shame it couldn't have lasted longer. . . . Ah yes. . . yes, I owe you. . . how much?"

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with broad grins on their faces, their hands outstretched.

CHAPTER NINE – THE DARK MARK

Don't tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly down the purple-carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, upon reflection, that he didn't want to know.

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, and given the level of noise around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together before turning in. They were soon arguing enjoyably about the match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbing with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep right at the tiny table and spilled hot chocolate all over the floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and insisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny went into the next tent, and Harry and the rest of the Weasleys changed into pajamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang.

"Oh I am glad I'm not on duty," muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. "I wouldn't fancy having to go and tell the Irish they've got to stop celebrating."

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occasional leprechaun lantern flying overhead, and picturing again some of Krum's more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint. . . . Somehow Oliver Wood had never managed to convey with all his wriggling diagrams what that move was supposed to look like. . . . Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on the back, and imagined the

sensation of hearing a hundred-thousand-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman's voice echoed throughout the stadium, "I give you. . . *Potter!*"

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep - his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have slipped into actual dreams - all he knew was that, quite suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting.

"Get up! Ron - Harry - come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

"S' matter?" he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He could hear screams, and the sound of people running. He slipped down from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, said, "No time, Harry - just grab a jacket and get outside - quickly!"

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels.

By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Harry squinted at them. . . . They didn't seem to have faces. . . . Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice Harry saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. The other three looked as though they might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; her nightdress fell down to reveal voluminous drawers and she struggled to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

"That's sick," Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground, his head flopping limply from side to side.

“That is really sick. . . .“

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. At the same moment, Bill, Charlie, and Percy emerged from the boys’ tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

“We’re going to help the Ministry!” Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. “You lot - get into the woods, and *stick together*. I’ll come and fetch you when we’ve sorted this out!”

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Ministry wizards were dashing from every direction toward the source of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

“C’mon,” said Fred, grabbing Ginny’s hand and starting to pull her toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George followed. They all looked back as they reached the trees. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

“What happened?” said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. “Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid - *lumos!*”

She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

“Tripped over a tree root,” he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

“Well, with feet that size, hard not to,” said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly relaxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

“Language, Weasley,” said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. “Hadn’t you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn’t like *her* spotted, would you?”

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Hermione defiantly. “Granger, they’re

after *Muggles*, “said Malfoy. “D’you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around. . . they’re moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh.”

“Hermione’s a witch,” Harry snarled.

“Have it your own way, Potter,” said Malfoy, grinning maliciously. “If you think they can’t spot a Mudblood, stay where you are.”

“You watch your mouth!” shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that “Mudblood” was a very offensive term for a witch or wizard of Muggle parentage.

“Never mind, Ron,” said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron’s arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

“Scare easily, don’t they?” he said lazily. “I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What’s he up to - trying to rescue the Muggles?”

“Where’re *your* parents?” said Harry, his temper rising. “Out there wearing masks, are they?”

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

“Well. . . if they were, I wouldn’t be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?”

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, “let’s go and find the others.”

“Keep that big bushy head down, Granger,” sneered Malfoy.

“Come *on*,” Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

“I’ll bet you anything his dad *is* one of that masked lot!” said Ron hotly.

“Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!” said Hermione fervently. “Oh I can’t believe this. Where have the others got to?”

Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite. A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, “*Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l’avons perdue* -“

“Er - what?” said Ron.

“Oh. . .“ The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, “Ogwarts.”

“Beauxbatons,” muttered Hermione.

“Sorry?” said Harry.

“They must go to Beauxbatons,” said Hermione. “You know... Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. . . I read about it in *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*.”

“Oh. . . yeah. . . right,” said Harry.

“Fred and George can’t have gone that far,” said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione’s, and squinting up the path. Harry dug in the pockets of his

jacket for his own wand - but it wasn't there. The only thing he could find was his Omniculars.

“Ah, no, I don't believe it. . . I've lost my wand!”

“You're kidding!”

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry looked all around him, but his wand was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe it's back in the tent,” said Ron.

“Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?” Hermione suggested anxiously.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “maybe. .

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a scene like this made him feel very vulnerable.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes nearby. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion, apparently with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

“There is bad wizards about!” she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. “People high - high in the air! Winky is getting out of the way!”

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was restraining her.

“What's up with her?” said Ron, looking curiously after Winky. “Why can't she run properly?”

“Bet she didn't ask permission to hide,” said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something the Malfoys wouldn't like, the house-elf had been forced to start beating himself up.

“You know, house-elves get a *very* raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly. “It's slavery, that's what it is! That Mr. Crouch made her go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he's got her bewitched so she can't even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn't anyone *do* something about it?”

“Well, the elves are happy, aren't they?” Ron said. “You heard old Winky back at the match. . . ‘House-elves is not supposed to have fun’ . . . that's what she likes, being bossed around. . . .”

“It's people like *you*, Ron,” Hermione began hotly, “who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they're too lazy to -”

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

“Let's just keep moving, shall we?” said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at

Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what Malfoy had said; perhaps Hermione *was* in more danger than they were. They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn't there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

"I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!" one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

"No, you're not!" yelled his friend. "You're a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. . . . but I'm a vampire hunter, I've killed about ninety so far -"

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to become the youngest ever Minister of Magic, I am."

Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus. He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron's face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, "Did I tell you I've invented a broomstick that'll reach Jupiter?"

"*Honestly!*" said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

Harry looked around. "I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We'll hear anyone coming a mile off."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them.

Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked buoyant and rosy-faced; there was no more spring in his step. He looked very white and strained.

"Who's that?" he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. "What are you doing in here, all alone?"

They looked at one another, surprised.

"Well - there's a sort of riot going on," said Ron.

Bagman stared at him.

"What?"

“At the campsite. . . some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. . .
Bagman swore loudly.

“Damn them!” he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he
Disapparated with a small *pop!*

“Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?” said Hermione, frowning.

“He was a great Beater, though,” said Ron, leading the way off the path into a
small clearing, and sitting down on a patch of dry grass at the foot of a tree. “The
Wimbourne Wasps won the league three times in a row while he was with them.”

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and
watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, the model was slightly duck-footed and
round-shouldered, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick.
Harry was listening for noise from the campsite. Everything seemed much quieter;
perhaps the riot was over.

“I hope the others are okay,” said Hermione after a while.

“They’ll be fine,” said Ron.

“Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy,” said Harry, sitting down next to
Ron and watching the small figure of Krum slouching over the fallen leaves. “He’s
always said he’d like to get something on him.”

“That’d wipe the smirk off old Draco’s face, all right,” said Ron.

“Those poor Muggles, though,” said Hermione nervously. “What if they can’t get
them down?”

“They will,” said Ron reassuringly. “They’ll find a way.”

“Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic’s out
here tonight!” said Hermione. “I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you
think they’ve been drinking, or are they just -“

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked
quickly around too. It sounded as though someone was staggering toward their clearing.
They waited, listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark trees. But the
footsteps came to a sudden halt.

“Hello?” called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too
dark to see very far, but he could sense somebody standing just beyond the range of his
vision.

“Who’s there?” he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had
heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

“*MORSMORDRE!*”

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of darkness

Harry's eyes had been struggling to penetrate; it flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

"What the - ?" gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun formation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the sudden appearance of the skull, which had now risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured the skull, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Who's there?" he called again.

"Harry, come on, *move!*" Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry!" Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's - "Harry, come on!"

Harry turned - Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum - the three of them started across the clearing - but before they had taken a few hurried steps, a series of popping noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was pointing right at himself, Ron, and Hermione.

Without pausing to think, he yelled, "DUCK!"

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

"STUPEFY!" roared twenty voices - there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as though a powerful wind had swept the clearing. Raising his head a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards' wands, crossing one another, bouncing off tree trunks, rebounding into the darkness--

"Stop!" yelled a voice he recognized. "STOP! *That's my son!*"

Harry's hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand. He rolled over and saw Mr. Weasley

striding toward them, looking terrified.

“Ron - Harry” - his voice sounded shaky - “Hermione - are you all right?”

“Out of the way, Arthur,” said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were closing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr. Crouch’s face was taut with rage.

“Which of you did it?” he snapped, his sharp eyes darting between them.

“Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?”

“We didn’t do that!” said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

“We didn’t do anything!” said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. “What did you want to attack us for?”

“Do not lie, sir!” shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still pointing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping - he looked slightly mad. “You have been discovered at the scene of the crime!”

“Barty,” whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, “they’re kids, Barty, they’d never have been able to

“Where did the Mark come from, you three?” said Mr. Weasley quickly.

“Over there,” said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. “There was someone behind the trees. . . they shouted words - an incantation -“

“Oh, stood over there, did they?” said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. “Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy -“

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had conjured the skull; on the contrary, at Hermione’s words, they had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the dark trees.

“We’re too late,” said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. “They’ll have Disapparated.”

“I don’t think so,” said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric’s father. “Our Stunners went right through those trees. . . . There’s a good chance we got them. . .

“Amos, be careful!” said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing, and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

“Yes! We got them! There’s someone here! Unconscious! It’s - but - blimey. .

“You’ve got someone?” shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving. “Who? Who is it?”

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Harry recognized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

“This - cannot - be,” he said jerkily. “No -“

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

“No point, Mr. Crouch,” Mr. Diggory called after him. “There’s no one else there.”

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of leaves as he pushed the bushes aside, searching.

“Bit embarrassing,” Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at Winky’s unconscious form. “Barty Crouch’s house-elf. . . I mean to say...”

“Come off it, Amos,” said Mr. Weasley quietly, “you don’t seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark’s a wizard’s sign. It requires a wand.”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Diggory, “and she *had* a wand.”

“*What?*” said Mr. Weasley.

“Here, look.” Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley. “Had it in her hand. So that’s clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. *No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand.*”

Just then there was another *pop*, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disorientated, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

“The Dark Mark!” he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. “Who did it? Did you get them? Barry! What’s going on?”

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were both twitching.

“Where have you been, Barty?” said Bagman. “Why weren’t you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too - gulping gargoyles!” Bagman had just noticed Winky lying at his feet. “What happened to *her?*”

“I have been busy, Ludo,” said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. “And my elf has been stunned.”

“Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why - ?“

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman’s round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then at Mr. Crouch.

“*No!*” he said. “Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn’t know how! She’d need a wand, for a start!”

“And she had one,” said Mr. Diggory. “I found her holding one, Ludo. If it’s all

right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she's got to say for herself."

Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his own wand, pointed it at Winky, and said, "*Ennervate!*"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into a sitting position.

She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. Harry could see the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Harry was reminded forcibly of Dobby in his moments of terrified disobedience.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

"I - I - I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the green light that was filling the clearing from the skull above, Harry recognized it

"Hey - that's mine!" he said

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

"That's my wand!" said Harry. "I dropped it!"

"You dropped it?" repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. "Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?"

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" said Mr. Weasley, very angrily. "Is *Harry Potter* likely to conjure the Dark Mark?"

"Er - of course not," mumbled Mr. Diggory. "Sorry. . . carried away. . ."

"I didn't drop it there, anyway," said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. "I missed it right after we got into the wood."

"So," said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. "You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you'd have some fun with it, did you?"

"I is not doing magic with it, sir!" squealed Winky, tears streaming down the

sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. "I is. . . I is. . . I is just picking it up, sir! i is not making the Dark Mark, sir, i is not knowing how!"

"It wasn't her!" said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speaking up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined all the same. "Winky's got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper!" She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support. "It didn't sound anything like Winky, did it?"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It definitely didn't sound like an elf."

"Yeah, it was a human voice," said Ron.

"Well, we'll soon see," growled Mr. Diggory, looking unimpressed. "There's a simple way of discovering the last spell a wand performed, elf, did you know that?"

Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flapping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it tip to tip with Harry's.

"Prior Incantato!" roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"So," said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

"I is not doing it!" she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. "I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn't using wands, I isn't knowing how!"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf!" Mr. Diggory roared. *"Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!"*

"Amos," said Mr. Weasley loudly, "think about it. . . precious few wizards know how to do that spell. . . . Where would she have learned it?"

"Perhaps Amos is suggesting," said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, "that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?"

There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified. "Mr. Crouch. . . not. . . not at all.

"You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are *least* likely to conjure that Mark!" barked Mr. Crouch. "Harry Potter - and myself. I suppose you are familiar with the boy's story, Amos?"

"Of course - everyone knows -" muttered Mr. Diggory, looking highly discomfited.

“And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and those who practice them?” Mr. Crouch shouted, his eyes bulging again.

“Mr. Crouch, I - I never suggested you had anything to do with it!” Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening behind his scrubby brown beard.

“If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!” shouted Mr. Crouch. “Where else would she have learned to conjure it?”

“She - she might’ve picked it up anywhere -“

“Precisely, Amos,” said Mr. Weasley. “*She might have picked it up anywhere.. . .* Winky?” he said kindly, turning to the elf, but she flinched as though he too was shouting at her. “Where exactly did you find Harry’s wand?”

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

“I - I is finding it. . . finding it there, sir. . . “ she whispered, “there . . . in the trees, sir.

“You see, Amos?” said Mr. Weasley. “Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they’d done it, leaving Harry’s wand behind. A clever thing to do, not using their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments later and pick it up.”

“But then, she’d have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!” said Mr. Diggory impatiently. “Elf? Did you see anyone?”

Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flickered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. Then she gulped and said, “I is seeing no one, sir. . . no one. .

“Amos,” said Mr. Crouch curtly, “I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky into your department for questioning. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her.”

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn’t think much of this suggestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was such an important member of the Ministry that he did not dare refuse him.

“You may rest assured that she will be punished,” Mr. Crouch added coldly.

“M-m-master. . . “ Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. “M-m-master, p-p-please. . . “

Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his gaze.

“Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have believed possible,” he said slowly. “I told her to remain in the tent. I told her to stay there while I went to sort out the trouble. And I find that she disobeyed me. *This means clothes.*”

“No!” shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch’s feet. “No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!”

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to present it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the way Winky clutched at her tea towel as she sobbed over Mr. Crouch’s feet.

“But she was frightened!” Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. “Your elf’s scared of heights, and those wizards in masks were levitating people! You can’t blame her for wanting to get out of their way!”

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

“I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me,” he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. “I have no use for a servant who forgets what is due to her master, and to her master’s reputation.”

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by Mr. Weasley, who said quietly, “Well, I think I’ll take my lot back to the tent, if nobody’s got any objections. Amos, that wand’s told us all it can - if Harry could have it back, please -“

Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

“Come on, you three,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione didn’t seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the sobbing elf. “Hermione!” Mr. Weasley said, more urgently. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

“What’s going to happen to Winky?” said Hermione, the moment they had left the clearing.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Weasley.

“The way they were treating her!” said Hermione furiously. “Mr. Diggory, calling her ‘elf’ all the time. . . and Mr. Crouch! He knows she didn’t do it and he’s still going to sack her! He didn’t care how frightened she’d been, or how upset she was - it was like she wasn’t even human!”

“Well, she’s not,” said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

“That doesn’t mean she hasn’t got feelings, Ron. It’s disgusting the way -“

“Hermione, I agree with you,” said Mr. Weasley quickly, beckoning her on, “but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. I want to get back to the tent as fast as we can. What happened to the others?”

“We lost them in the dark,” said Ron. “Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?”

“I’ll explain everything back at the tent,” said Mr. Weasley tensely.

But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was congregated there, and when they saw Mr. Weasley coming toward them, many of them surged forward.

“What’s going on in there?”

“Who conjured it?”

“Arthur - it’s not - *Him?*”

“Of course it’s not Him,” said Mr. Weasley impatiently. “We don’t know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. Now excuse me, please, I want to get to bed.”

He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the masked wizards, though several ruined tents were still smoking.

Charlie’s head was poking out of the boys’ tent.

“Dad, what’s going on?” he called through the dark. “Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others -“

“I’ve got them here,” said Mr. Weasley, bending down and entering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him.

Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheet to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a large rip in his shirt, and Percy was sporting a bloody nose. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

“Did you get them, Dad?” said Bill sharply. “The person who conjured the Mark?”

“No,” said Mr. Weasley. “We found Barry Crouch’s elf holding Harry’s wand, but we’re none the wiser about who actually conjured the Mark.”

“*What?*” said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together. “Harry’s wand?” said Fred.

“*Mr. Crouch’s elf*” said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

“Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!” he said. “Running away when he’d expressly told her not to. . . embarrassing him in front of the whole Ministry. . . how would that have looked, if she’d been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control -“

“She didn’t do anything - she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!” Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked very taken aback. Hermione had always got on fairly well with Percy - better, indeed, than any of the others.

“Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch’s position can’t afford a house-elf who’s going to run amok with a wand!” said Percy pompously, recovering himself.

“She didn’t run amok!” shouted Hermione. “She just picked it up off the ground!”

“Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?” said Ron impatiently. “It wasn’t hurting anyone. . . . Why’s it such a big deal?”

“I told you, it’s You-Know-Who’s symbol, Ron,” said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. “I read about it in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*.”

“And it hasn’t been seen for thirteen years,” said Mr. Weasley quietly. “Of course people panicked. . . it was almost like seeing You-Know-Who back again.”

“I don’t get it,” said Ron, frowning. “I mean. . . it’s still only a shape in the sky. .

“Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed,” said Mr. Weasley. “The terror it inspired. . . you have no idea, you’re too young. Just picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you’re about to find inside. . . .” Mr. Weasley winced. “Everyone’s worst fear. . . the very worst..

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, “Well, it didn’t help us tonight, whoever conjured it. It scared the Death Eaters away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we’d got near enough to unmask any of them. We caught the Robertses before they hit the ground, though. They’re having their memories modified right now.”

“Death Eaters?” said Harry. “What are Death Eaters?”

“It’s what You-Know-Who’s supporters called themselves,” said Bill. “I think we saw what’s left of them tonight - the ones who managed to keep themselves out of Azkaban, anyway.”

“We can’t prove it was them, Bill,” said Mr. Weasley. “Though it probably was,” he added hopelessly.

“Yeah, I bet it was!” said Ron suddenly. “Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was one of those nutters in masks! And we all know the Malfoys were right in with You-Know-Who!”

“But what were Voldemort’s supporters -“ Harry began. Everybody flinched - like most of the wizarding world, the Weasleys always avoided saying Voldemort’s name. “Sorry,” said Harry quickly. “What were You-Know-Who’s supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?”

“The point?” said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. “Harry, that’s their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for fun. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn’t resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them,” he finished disgustedly.

“But if they *were* the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?” said Ron. “They’d have been pleased to see it, wouldn’t they?”

“Use your brains, Ron,” said Bill. “If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when You-Know-Who lost power, and told all sorts of lies about him forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they’d be even more frightened than the rest of us to see him come back. They denied they’d ever been involved with him when he lost his powers, and went back to their daily lives. . . . I don’t reckon he’d be over-pleased with them, do you?”

“So. . . whoever conjured the Dark Mark. . .“ said Hermione slowly, “were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters, or to scare them away?”

“Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione,” said Mr. Weasley. “But I’ll tell you this. . . it was only the Death Eaters who ever knew how to conjure it. I’d be very surprised if the person who did it hadn’t been a Death Eater once, even if they’re not now. . . Listen, it’s very late, and if your mother hears what’s happened she’ll be worried sick. We’ll get a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here.”

Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning, but he felt wide-awake - wide-awake, and worried.

Three days ago - it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days - he had awoken with his scar burning. And tonight, for the first time in thirteen years, Lord Voldemort’s mark had appeared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would he reply? Harry lay looking up at the canvas, but no flying fantasies came to him now to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie’s snores filled the tent that Harry finally dozed off.

CHAPTER TEN – MAYHEM AT THE MINISTRY

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite as quickly as possible, passing Mr. Roberts at the door of his cottage. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague “Merry Christmas.”

“He’ll be all right,” said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. “Sometimes, when a person’s memory’s modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while. . . and that was a big thing they had to make him forget.”

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a great number of witches and wizards gathered around Basil, the keeper of the Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried discussion with Basil; they joined the queue, and were able to take an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole and up the

damp lane toward the Burrow in the dawn light, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner and the Burrow came into view, a cry echoed along the lane.

“Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!”

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her bedroom slippers, her face pale and strained, a rolled-up copy of the *Daily Prophet* clutched in her hand.

“Arthur - I’ve been so worried - *so worried*-”

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley’s neck, and the *Daily Prophet* fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Looking down, Harry saw the headline: *SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP*, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops.

“You’re all right,” Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red eyes, “you’re alive. . . . Oh *boys*. . .”

And to everybody’s surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads banged together.

“*Ouch!* Mum - you’re strangling us -“

“I shouted at you before you left!” Mrs. Weasley said, starting to sob. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who had got you, and the last thing I ever said to you was that you didn’t get enough O.W.L.s? Oh Fred. . . George. . .”

“Come on, now, Molly, we’re all perfectly okay,” said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back toward the house. “Bill,” he added in an undertone, “pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. . .”

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, into which Mr. Weasley insisted on pouring a shot of Ogdens Old Firewhiskey, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

“I knew it,” said Mr. Weasley heavily. “*Ministry blunders. . . culprits not apprehended. . . lax security. . . Dark wizards running unchecked... national disgrace. . .* Who wrote this? Ah. . . of course. . . Rita Skeeter.”

“That woman’s got it in for the Ministry of Magic!” said Percy furiously. “Last week she was saying we’re wasting our time quibbling about cauldron thickness, when we should be stamping out vampires! As if it wasn’t *specifically* stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans --“

“Do us a favor, Perce,” said Bill, yawning, “and shut up.”

“I’m mentioned,” said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the *Daily Prophet* article.

“Where?” spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whiskey. “If I’d seen

that, I'd have known you were alive!"

"Not by name," said Mr. Weasley. "Listen to this: *'If the terrified wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news at the edge of the wood expected reassurance from the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark alleging that nobody had been hurt, but refusing to give any more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods an hour later, remains to be seen.'* Oh really," said Mr. Weasley in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy.

"Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? *Rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods.* . . well, there certainly will be rumors now she's printed that."

He heaved a deep sigh. "Molly, I'm going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over."

"I'll come with you, Father," said Percy importantly. "Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my cauldron report in person."

He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset. "Arthur, you're supposed to be on holiday! This hasn't got anything to do with your office; surely they can handle this without you?"

"I've got to go, Molly," said Mr. Weasley. "I've made things worse. I'll just change into my robes and I'll be off. . . ."

"Mrs. Weasley," said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, "Hedwig hasn't arrived with a letter for me, has she?"

"Hedwig, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. "No. . . no, there hasn't been any post at all."

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaningful look at both of them he said, "All right if I go and dump my stuff in your room, Ron?"

"Yeah. . . think I will too," said Ron at once. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"What's up, Harry?" said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

"There's something I haven't told you," Harry said. "On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again."

Ron's and Hermione's reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive. Hermione gasped and started making suggestions at once, mentioning a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron simply looked dumbstruck.

"But - he wasn't there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean - last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, wasn't he?"

“I’m sure he wasn’t on Privet Drive,” said Harry. “But I was dreaming about him.. . him and Peter - you know, Wormtail. I can’t remember all of it now, but they were plotting to kill...someone.”

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying “me,” but couldn’t bring himself to make Hermione look any more horrified than she already did.

“It was only a dream,” said Ron bracingly. “Just a nightmare.”

“Yeah, but was it, though?” said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. “It’s weird, isn’t it? . . . My scar hurts, and three days later the Death Eaters are on the march, and Voldemort’s sign’s up in the sky again.”

“Don’t - say - his - name!” Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

“And remember what Professor Trelawney said?” Harry went on, ignoring Ron. “At the end of last year?”

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione’s terrified look vanished as she let out a derisive snort.

“Oh Harry, you aren’t going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?”

“You weren’t there,” said Harry. “You didn’t hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance - a real one. And she said the Dark Lord would rise again. . . *greater and more terrible than ever before*. . . and he’d manage it because his servant was going to go back to him. . . and that night Wormtail escaped.”

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

“Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Are you expecting a letter?”

“I told Sirius about my scar,” said Harry, shrugging. “I’m waiting for his answer.”

“Good thinking!” said Ron, his expression clearing. “I bet Sirius’ll know what to do!”

“I hoped he’d get back to me quickly,” said Harry.

“But we don’t know where Sirius is. . . he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn’t he?” said Hermione reasonably. “Hedwig’s not going to manage that journey in a few days.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedwig-free sky.

“Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry” said Ron. “Come on - three on three, Bill and Charlie and Fred and George will play. . . . You can try out the Wronski Feint... .“

“Ron,” said Hermione, in an I-don’t-think-you’re-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, “Harry doesn’t want to play Quidditch right now... . He’s worried, and he’s tired. . . . We all need to go to bed...”

“Yeah, I want to play Quidditch,” said Harry suddenly. “Hang on, I’ll get my Firebolt.”

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like “Boys.”

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the following week. Both left the house each morning before the rest of the family got up, and returned well after dinner every night.

“It’s been an absolute uproar,” Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Hogwarts. “I’ve been putting out fires all week. People keep sending Howlers, and of course, if you don’t open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my best quill reduced to cinders.”

“Why are they all sending Howlers?” asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* with Spellotape on the rug in front of the living room fire.

“Complaining about security at the World Cup,” said Percy. “They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher’s put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with en-suite Jacuzzi, but I’ve got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks.”

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family’s names. There were no numerals around the face, but descriptions of where each family member might be. “Home,” “school,” and “work” were there, but there was also “traveling,” “lost,” “hospital,” “prison,” and, in the position where the number twelve would be on a normal clock, “mortal peril.”

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the “home” position, but Mr. Weasley’s, which was the longest, was still pointing to “work.” Mrs. Weasley sighed.

“Your father hasn’t had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who,” she said. “They’re working him far too hard. His dinner’s going to be ruined if he doesn’t come home soon.”

“Well, Father feels he’s got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn’t he?” said Percy. “If truth be told, he was a tad unwise to make a public statement without clearing it with his Head of Department first -“

“Don’t you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!” said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at once.

“If Dad hadn’t said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had commented,” said Bill, who was playing chess with Ron.

“Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts’ Charm Breakers once, and called me ‘a long-haired pillock?’”

“Well, it *is* a bit long, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley gently. “If you’d just let me -“
“No, Mum.”

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, copies of which Mrs. Weasley had bought for her, Harry, and Ron in Diagon Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermione had given him for his thirteenth birthday open at his feet. Fred and George were sitting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchment.

“What are you two up to?” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

“Homework,” said Fred vaguely.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re still on holiday,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Yeah, we’ve left it a bit late,” said George.

“You’re not by any chance writing out a new *order form*, are you?” said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. “You wouldn’t be thinking of restarting Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, by any chance?”

“Now, Mum,” said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. “If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and George and I died, how would you feel to know that the last thing we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?”

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh your father’s coming!” she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley’s hand had suddenly spun from “work” to “traveling”; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on “home” with the others, and they heard him calling from the kitchen.

“Coming, Arthur!” called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm living room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked completely exhausted.

“Well, the fat’s really in the fire now,” he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed unenthusiastically with his somewhat shriveled cauliflower. “Rita Skeeter’s been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she’s found out about poor old Bertha going missing, so that’ll be the headline in the *Prophet* tomorrow. I *told* Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago.”

“Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks,” said Percy swiftly.

“Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn’t found out about Winky,” said Mr. Weasley irritably. “There’d be a week’s worth of headlines in his house-elf being caught holding the wand that conjured the Dark Mark.”

“I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did *not* conjure the Mark?” said Percy hotly.

“If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the *Daily Prophet* knows how mean he is to elves!” said Hermione angrily.

“Now look here, Hermione!” said Percy. “A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedience from his servants –“

“His *slave*, you mean!” said Hermione, her voice rising passionately, “because he didn’t *pay* Winky, did he?”

“I think you’d all better go upstairs and check that you’ve packed properly!” said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argument. “Come on now, all of you. . . .“

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The rain sounded even louder at the top of the house, accompanied by loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigwidgeon began twittering and zooming around his cage when they entered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

“Bung him some Owl Treats,” said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry. “It might shut him up.”

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon’s cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig’s cage stood next to it, still empty.

“It’s been over a week,” Harry said, looking at Hedwig’s deserted perch. “Ron, you don’t reckon Sirius has been caught, do you?”

“Nah, it would’ve been in the *Daily Prophet*,” said Ron. “The Ministry would want to show they’d caught *someone*, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, I suppose. . . .“

“Look, here’s the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she’s got some gold out of your vault for you. . . and she’s washed all your socks.”

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry’s camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry started unwrapping the shopping. Apart from *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his potion-making kit - he had been running low on spine of lionfish and essence of belladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust behind him.

“What is that supposed to be?”

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

“Here you are,” she said, sorting them into two piles. “Now, mind you pack them properly so they don’t crease.”

“Mum, you’ve given me Ginny’s new dress,” said Ron, handing it out to her.

“Of course I haven’t,” said Mrs. Weasley. “That’s for you. Dress robes.”

“What?” said Ron, looking horror-struck.

“Dress robes!” repeated Mrs. Weasley. “It says on your school list that you’re supposed to have dress robes this year. . . robes for formal occasions.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Ron in disbelief. “I’m not wearing that, no way.”

“Everyone wears them, Ron!” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “They’re all like that! Your father’s got some for smart parties!”

“I’ll go starkers before I put that on,” said Ron stubbornly.

“Don’t be so silly,” said Mrs. Weasley. “You’ve got to have dress robes, they’re on your list! I got some for Harry too. . . show him, Harry... .“

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn’t as bad as he had expected, however; his dress robes didn’t have any lace on them at all - in fact, they were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green instead of black.

“I thought they’d bring out the color of your eyes, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

“Well, they’re okay!” said Ron angrily, looking at Harry’s robes. “Why couldn’t I have some like that?”

“Because. . . well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn’t a lot of choice!” said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew they would never take it.

“I’m never wearing them,” Ron was saying stubbornly. “Never.”

“Fine,” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh.”

She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon was choking on an overlarge Owl Treat.

“Why is everything I own rubbish?” said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon’s beak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – ABOARD THE HOGWART EXPRESS

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splattering against the window as he got dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor landing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking harassed.

“Arthur!” she called up the staircase. “Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!”

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtled out of sight. When Harry and the others entered the kitchen, they saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers - “I’ve got a quill here somewhere!” - and Mr. Weasley bending over the fire, talking to -

Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory’s head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely unperturbed by the sparks flying around it and the flames licking its ears.

“. . . Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d’you-call-’ems - please-men. Arthur, you’ve got to get over there --“

“Here!” said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley’s hands.

“- it’s a real stroke of luck I heard about it,” said Mr. Diggory’s head. “I had to come into the office early to send a couple of owls, and I found the Improper Use of Magic lot all setting off -- if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur --“

“What does Mad-Eye say happened?” asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to take notes.

Mr. Diggory’s head rolled its eyes. “Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but was ambushed by his dustbins.”

“What did the dustbins do?” asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically.

“Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell,” said Mr. Diggory. “Apparently one of them was still rocketing around when the please-men turned up -“

Mr. Weasley groaned.

“And what about the intruder?”

“Arthur, you know Mad-Eye,” said Mr. Diggory’s head, rolling its eyes again. “Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of night? More likely there’s a very shell-shocked cat wandering around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, he’s had it -- think of his record - - we’ve got to get him off on a minor charge, something in your department -- what are exploding dustbins worth?”

“Might be a caution,” said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. “Mad-Eye didn’t use his wand? He didn’t actually attack anyone?”

“I’ll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window,” said Mr. Diggory, “but they’ll have a job proving it, there aren’t any casualties.”

“All right, I’m off,” Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parchment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out of the kitchen again.

Mr. Diggory’s head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

“Sorry about this, Molly,” it said, more calmly, “bothering you so early and everything...but Arthur’s the only one who can get Mad-Eye off, and Mad-Eye’s supposed to be starting his new job today. Why he had to choose last night. .”

“Never mind, Amos,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sure you won’t have a bit of toast or anything before you go?”

“Oh go on, then,” said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it into Mr. Diggory’s mouth.

“Fanks,” he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small *pop*, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back in the kitchen, his robes on the right way now, dragging a comb through his hair.

“I’d better hurry - you have a good term, boys, said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders and preparing to Disapparate. “Molly, are you going to be all right taking the kids to King’s Cross?”

“Of course I will,” she said. “You just look after Mad-Eye, we’ll be fine.”

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

“Did someone say Mad-Eye?” Bill asked. “What’s he been up to now.”

“He says someone tried to break into his house last night,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Mad-Eye Moody?” said George thoughtfully, spreading marmalade on his toast.

“Isn’t he that nutter -“

“Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody,” said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

“Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn’t he?” said Fred quietly as Mrs. Weasley left the room. “Birds of a feather. . .“

“Moody was a great wizard in his time,” said Bill.

“He’s an old friend of Dumbledore’s, isn’t he?” said Charlie.

“Dumbledore’s not what you’d call *normal*, though, is he?” said Fred. “I mean, I know he’s a genius and everything. . .“

“Who *is* Mad-Eye?” asked Harry.

“He’s retired, used to work at the Ministry,” said Charlie. “I met him once when Dad took me into work with him. He was an Auror - one of the best. . . a Dark wizard catcher,” he added, seeing Harry’s blank look “Half the cells in Azkaban are full because

of him. He made himself loads of enemies, though. . . the families of people he caught, mainly. . . and I heard he's been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn't trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere."

Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King's Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, said that he really needed to get to work.

"I just can't justify taking more time off at the moment," he told them. "Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me."

"Yeah, you know what, Percy?" said George seriously. "I reckon he'll know your name soon."

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them into London.

"Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us," Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard, watching the taxi drivers heaving six heavy Hogwarts trunks into their cars. "But there weren't any to spare. . . . Oh dear, they don't look happy, do they?"

Harry didn't like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was making an earsplitting racket. Nor did it help that a number of Filibuster's Fabulous No-Heat, Wet-Start Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred's trunk sprang open, causing the driver carrying it to yell with fright and pain as Crookshanks clawed his way up the man's leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crookshanks took quite a while to recover from the fireworks, and by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get out at King's Cross, even though the rain was coming down harder than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the apparently solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid attracting Muggle attention. They did it in groups today; Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the most conspicuous, since they were accompanied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casually against the barrier, chatting unconcernedly, and slid sideways through it. . . and as they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like dark ghosts. Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione set

off to find seats, and were soon stowing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie.

“I might be seeing you all sooner than you think,” said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

“Why?” said Fred keenly.

“You’ll see,” said Charlie. “Just don’t tell Percy I mentioned it. . . it’s ‘classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it,’ after all.”

“Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year,” said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

“*Why?*” said George impatiently.

“You’re going to have an interesting year,” said Bill, his eyes twinkling. “I might even get time off to come and watch a bit of it.”

“A bit of what?” said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

“Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley,” said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned out of the window to talk to her.

“Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley,” said Harry.

“Oh it was my pleasure, dears,” said Mrs. Weasley. “I’d invite you for Christmas, but. . . well, I expect you’re all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with. . . one thing and another.”

“Mum!” said Ron irritably. “What d’you three know that we don’t?”

“You’ll find out this evening, I expect,” said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. “It’s going to be very exciting - mind you, I’m very glad they’ve changed the rules -“

“What rules?” said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

“I’m sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. . . . Now, behave, won’t you? *Won’t* you, Fred? And you, George?”

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

“Tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts!” Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away from them. “What rules are they changing?”

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disappeared.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see out of them. Ron undid his trunk, pulled out his maroon dress robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon’s cage to muffle his hooting.

“Bagman wanted to tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts,” he said grumpily,

sitting down next to Harry. "At the World Cup, remember? But my own mother won't say. Wonder what --"

"Shh!" Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to theirs. Harry and Ron listened, and heard a familiar drawling voice drifting in through the open door.

". . . Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore - the man's such a Mudblood-lover - and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of ruffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually *learn* them, not just the defense rubbish we do. . . ."

Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?" she said angrily. "I wish he *had* gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with him."

"Durmstrang's another wizarding school?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione sniffily, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"I think I've heard of it," said Ron vaguely. "Where is it? What country?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"Er - why not?" said Harry.

"There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

"Come off it," said Ron, starting to laugh. "Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts -- how are you going to hide a great big castle?"

"But Hogwarts *is* hidden," said Hermione, in surprise. "Everyone knows that. . . well, everyone who's read *Hogwarts, A History*, anyway."

"Just you, then," said Ron. "So go on - how d'you hide a place like Hogwarts?"

"It's bewitched," said Hermione. "If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE."

"So Durmstrang'll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?"

"Maybe," said Hermione, shrugging, "or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they'll have made it Unplottable --"

"Come again?"

"Well, you can enchant a building so it's impossible to plot on a map, can't

you?”

“Er. . . if you say so,” said Harry.

“But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Somewhere very cold, because they’ve got fur capes as part of their uniforms.”

“Ah, think of the possibilities,” said Ron dreamily. “It would’ve been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident. . . . Shame his mother likes him. . . .”

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that the lanterns were lit by midday. The lunch trolley came rattling along the corridor, and Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking “*Troy - Mullet - Moran!*” but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others’ conversation as they relived the Cup match.

“Gran didn’t want to go,” he said miserably. “Wouldn’t buy tickets. It sounded amazing though.”

“It was,” said Ron. “Look at this, Neville. . .

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

“Oh *wow*,” said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his pudgy hand.

“We saw him right up close, as well,” said Ron. “We were in the Top Box -“
“For the first and last time in your life, Weasley.”

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evidently they had overheard the conversation through the compartment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

“Don’t remember asking you to join us, Malfoy,” said Harry coolly.

“Weasley. . . what is *that?*” said Malfoy, pointing at Pigwidgeon’s cage. A sleeve of Ron’s dress robes was dangling from it, swaying with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Ron made to stuff the robes out of sight, but Malfoy was too quick for him; he seized the sleeve and pulled.

“Look at this!” said Malfoy in ecstasy, holding up Ron’s robes and showing Crabbe and Goyle, “Weasley, you weren’t thinking of *wearing* these, were you? I mean - they were very fashionable in about eighteen ninety. . .

“Eat dung, Malfoy!” said Ron, the same color as the dress robes as he snatched them back out of Malfoy’s grip. Malfoy howled with derisive laughter; Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

“So. . . going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There’s money involved as well, you know. . . you’d be able to afford some decent robes if you won. . . .“

“What are you talking about?” snapped Ron.

‘*Are you going to enter?*’ Malfoy repeated. “I suppose *you* will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?”

“Either explain what you’re on about or go away, Malfoy,” said Hermione testily, over the top of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy’s pale face

“Don’t tell me you don’t *know?*” he said delightedly. “You’ve got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don’t even *know?* My God, *my* father told me about it ages ago. . . heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father’s always associated with the top people at the Ministry. . . . Maybe your father’s too junior to know about it, Weasley. . . yes. . . they probably don’t talk about important stuff in front of him. . . .“

Laughing once more, Malfoy beckoned to Crabbe and Goyle, and the three of them disappeared.

Ron got to his feet and slammed the sliding compartment door so hard behind them that the glass shattered.

“*Ron!*” said Hermione reproachfully, and she pulled out her wand, muttered “*Reparo!*” and the glass shards flew back into a single pane and back into the door.

“Well. . . making it look like he knows everything and we don’t. . . .“ Ron snarled. “*Father’s always associated with the top people at the Ministry.*’ . . . Dad could’ve got a promotion any time. . . he just likes it where he is. . . .“

“Of course he does,” said Hermione quietly. “Don’t let Malfoy get to you, Ron -“

“Him! Get to me!? As if!” said Ron, picking up one of the remaining Cauldron Cakes and squashing it into a pulp.

Ron’s bad mood continued for the rest of the journey. He didn’t talk much as they changed into their school robes, and was still glowering when the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead. Hermione

bundled up Crookshanks in her cloak and Ron left his dress robes over Pigwidgeon as they left the train, heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

“Hi, Hagrid!” Harry yelled, seeing a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform.

“All righ’, Harry?” Hagrid bellowed back, waving. “See yeh at the feast if we don’ drown!”

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid.

“Oooh, I wouldn’t fancy crossing the lake in this weather,” said Hermione fervently, shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville climbed gratefully into one of them, the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts Castle.

CHAPTER TWELVE – THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dangerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the window, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

“Blimey,” said Ron, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, “if that keeps up the lake’s going to overflow. I’m soak - **ARRGH!**”

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Ron’s head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggered sideways into Harry, just as a second water bomb dropped - narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry’s feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. People all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

“**PEEVES!**” yelled an angry voice. “Peeves, come down here at **ONCE!**”

Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and head of Gryffindor House, had

come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

“Ouch - sorry, Miss Granger -“

“That’s all right, Professor!” Hermione gasped, massaging her throat.

“Peeves, get down here NOW!” barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles.

“Not doing nothing!” cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall. “Already wet, aren’t they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeeee!” And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

“I shall call the headmaster!” shouted Professor McGonagall. “I’m warning you, Peeves -“

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, cackling insanely.

“Well, move along, then!” said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. “Into the Great Hall, come on!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron muttering furiously under his breath as he pushed his sopping hair off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Gryffindors at the far side of the Hall, next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed tonight in his usual doublet, but with a particularly large ruff, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn’t wobble too much on his partially severed neck.

“Good evening,” he said, beaming at them.

“Says who?” said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water.

“Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I’m starving.”

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of circumstances, Harry hadn’t been present at one since his own. He was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breathless voice called down the table.

“Hiya, Harry!”

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was something of a hero.

“Hi, Colin,” said Harry warily.

“Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother’s starting! My brother Dennis!”

“Er - good,” said Harry.

“He’s really excited!” said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. “I just hope he’s in Gryffindor! Keep your fingers crossed, eh, Harry?”

“Er - yeah, all right,” said Harry. He turned back to Hermione, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. “Brothers and sisters usually go in the same Houses, don’t they?” he said. He was judging by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

“Oh no, not necessarily,” said Hermione. “Parvati Patil’s twin’s in Ravenclaw, and they’re identical. You’d think they’d be together, wouldn’t you?”

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was still fighting his way across the lake with the first years; Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty chair too, and Harry couldn’t think who else was missing.

“Where’s the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry’s favorite by far had been Professor Lupin, who had resigned last year. He looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

“Maybe they couldn’t get anyone!” said Hermione, looking anxious.

Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of cushions beside Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, whose hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department. On Professor Sinistra’s other side was the sallow-faced, hook-nosed, greasy-haired Potions master, Snape - Harry’s least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry’s loathing of Snape was matched only by Snape’s hatred of him, a hatred which had, if possible, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape’s overlarge nose - Snape and Sirius had been enemies since their own school days.

On Snape’s other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall’s. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, sat Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, his sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green robes embroidered with many stars and moons. The tips of Dumbledore’s long, thin fingers were together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles as though lost in thought.

Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it.

“Oh hurry up,” Ron moaned, beside Harry, “I could eat a hippogriff.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall was leading a long line of first years up to the top of the Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school - all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid’s moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it hooked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. When he had lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught Colin Creevey’s eye, gave a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, *I fell in the lake!* He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a three-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty patched wizard’s hat. The first years stared at it. So did everyone else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song:

*A thousand years or more ago,
When I was newly sewn,
There lived four wizards of renown,
Whose names are still well known:
Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,
Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,
Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,
Shrewd Slytherin, from fin.
They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,
They hatched a daring plan
To educate young sorcerers
Thus Hogwarts School began.
Now each of these four founders
Formed their own house, for each
Did value different virtues
In the ones they had to teach.
By Gryffindor, the bravest were
Prized far beyond the rest;
For Ravenclaw, the cleverest
Would always be the best;
For Hufflepuff, hard workers were*

*Most worthy of admission;
And power-hungry Slytherin
Loved those of great ambition.
While still alive they did divide
Their favorites from the throng,
Yet how to pick the worthy ones
When they were dead and gone?
'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,
He whipped me off his head
The founders put some brains in me
So I could choose instead!
Now slip me snug about your ears,
I've never yet been wrong,
I'll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!*

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

“That’s not the song it sang when it Sorted us,” said Harry, clapping along with everyone else.

“Sings a different one every year,” said Ron. “It’s got to be a pretty boring life, hasn’t it, being a hat? I suppose it spends all year making up the next one.”

Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

“When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool,” she told the first years. “When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table.

“Ackerley, Stewart!”

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.

“RAVENCLAW!” shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him. Harry caught a glimpse of Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker, cheering Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

“Baddock, Malcolm!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins. Harry wondered whether Baddock knew that Slytherin House had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

“Branstone, Eleanor!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Cauldwell, Owen!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Creevey, Dennis!”

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid’s moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through a door behind the teachers’ table. About twice as tall as a normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly alarming - a misleading impression, for Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched Dennis Creevey putting on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide-- -

“GRYFFINDOR!” the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey, beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and hurried over to join his brother.

“Colin, I fell in!” he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. “It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!”

“Cool!” said Colin, just as excitedly. “It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!”

“*Wow!*” said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed, fathoms-deep lake, and pushed out of it again by a giant sea monster.

“Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one with the black hair and glasses? See him? *Know who he is, Dennis?*”

Harry looked away, staring very hard at the Sorting Hat, now Sorting Emma Dobbs.

The Sorting continued; boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the three-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly as Professor McGonagall passed the L’s.

“Oh hurry up,” Ron moaned, massaging his stomach.

“Now, Ron, the Sorting’s much more important than food,” said Nearly Headless Nick as “Madley, Laura!” became a Hufflepuff.

“Course it is, if you’re dead,” snapped Ron.

“I do hope this year’s batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch,” said Nearly Headless Nick, applauding as “McDonald, Natalie!” joined the Gryffindor table. “We don’t want to break our winning streak, do we?”

Gryffindor had won the Inter-House Championship for the last three years in a row.

“Pritchard, Graham!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Quirke, Orla!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

And finally, with “Whitby, Kevin!” (“HUFFLEPUFF!”), the Sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

“About time,” said Ron, seizing his knife and fork and looking expectantly at his golden plate.

Professor Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome.

“I have only two words to say to you,” he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. “*Tuck in.*”

“Hear, hear!” said Harry and Ron loudly as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Nearly Headless Nick watched mournfully as Harry, Ron, and Hermione loaded their own plates.

“Aaah, ‘at’s be’er,” said Ron, with his mouth full of mashed potato.

“You’re lucky there’s a feast at all tonight, you know,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “There was trouble in the kitchens earlier.”

“Why? Wha’ ‘appened?” said Harry, through a sizable chunk of steak.

“Peeves, of course,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shaking his head, which wobbled dangerously. He pulled his ruff a little higher up on his neck. “The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast - well, it’s quite out of the question, you know what he’s like, utterly uncivilized, can’t see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost’s council - the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance - but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down.”

The Bloody Baron was the Slytherin ghost, a gaunt and silent specter covered in silver bloodstains. He was the only person at Hogwarts who could really control Peeves.

“Yeah, we thought Peeves seemed hacked off about something,” said Ron darkly. “So what did he do in the kitchens?”

“Oh the usual,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. “Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits--“

Clang.

Hermione had knocked over her golden goblet. Pumpkin juice spread steadily over the tablecloth, staining several feet of white linen orange, but Hermione paid no attention.

“There are house-elves *here?*” she said, staring, horror-struck, at Nearly Headless Nick. “Here at *Hogwarts?*”

“Certainly,” said Nearly Headless Nick, looking surprised at her reaction. “The

largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred.”

“I’ve never seen one!” said Hermione.

“Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?” said Nearly Headless Nick. “They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning.. . see to the fires and so on.. . . I mean, you’re not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there?”

Hermione stared at him.

“But they get *paid*?” she said. “They get *holidays*, don’t they? And - and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?”

Nearly Headless Nick chortled so much that his ruff slipped and his head flopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.

“Sick leave and pensions?” he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. “House-elves don’t want sick leave and pensions!”

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

“Oh c’mon, ‘Er-my-knee,” said Ron, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of Yorkshire pudding. “Oops -- sorry, ‘Arry --“ He swallowed. “You won’t get them sick leave by starving yourself!”

“Slave labor,” said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. “That’s what made this dinner. *Slave labor*.”

And she refused to eat another bite.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

“Treacle tart, Hermione!” said Ron, deliberately wafting its smell toward her. “Spotted dick, look! Chocolate gateau!”

But Hermione gave him a look so reminiscent of Professor McGonagall that he gave up.

When the puddings too had been demolished, and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Albus Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

“So!” said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. “Now that we are all fed and watered,” (“Hmph!” said Hermione) “I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos,

Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it."

The corners of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. He continued, "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"*What?*" Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbledore went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy - but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts -"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then began to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull *clunk* echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye - and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it, muttering words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and

replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side.

The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

“May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. “Professor Moody.”

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students chapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody’s bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

“Moody?” Harry muttered to Ron. “*Mad-Eye Moody?* The one your dad went to help this morning?”

“Must be,” said Ron in a low, awed voice.

“What happened to him?” Hermione whispered. “What happened to his *face?*”

“Dunno,” Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fascination.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“As I was saying,” he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, “we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

“You’re JOKING!” said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody’s arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively.

“I am *not* joking, Mr. Weasley,” he said, “though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

“Er - but maybe this is not the time.. . no. . .” said Dumbledore, “where was I?

Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament. . . well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who *do* know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

“The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities - until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued.”

“*Death toll?*” Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

“There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

“The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money.”

“I’m going for it!” Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

“Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts,” he said, “the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age - that is to say, seventeen years or older - will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This” -- Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious - “is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that

students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hog-warts champion.” His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred’s and George’s mutinous faces. “I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen.

“The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!”

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

“They can’t do that!” said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glaring at Dumbledore. “We’re seventeen in April, why can’t we have a shot?”

“They’re not stopping me entering,” said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. “The champions’ll get to do all sorts of stuff you’d never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!”

“Yeah,” said Ron, a faraway look on his face. “Yeah, a thousand Galleons. . .“

“Come on,” said Hermione, “we’ll be the only ones left here if you don’t move.”

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

“Who’s this impartial judge who’s going to decide who the champions are?” said Harry.

“Dunno,” said Fred, “but it’s them we’ll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George.. .”

“Dumbledore knows you’re not of age, though,” said Ron.

“Yeah, but he’s not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?” said Fred shrewdly. “Sounds to me like once this judge knows who wants to enter, he’ll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore’s trying to stop us giving our names.”

“People have died, though!” said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

“Yeah,” said Fred airily, “but that was years ago, wasn’t it? Anyway, where’s the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get ‘round Dumbledore?”

Fancy entering?”

“What d’you reckon?” Ron asked Harry. “Be cool to enter, wouldn’t it? But I s’pose they might want someone older.... Dunno if we’ve learned enough.. .”

“I definitely haven’t,” came Neville’s gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

“I expect my gran’d want me to try, though. She’s always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I’ll just have to -- oops. . .”

Neville’s foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particular step, but Neville’s memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armor at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

“Shut it, you,” said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed. They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

“Password?” she said as they approached.

“Balderdash,” said George, “a prefect downstairs told me.”

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular common room, which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. Hermione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter “*Slave labor*” before bidding them good night and disappearing through the doorway to the girls’ dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase until they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Five four-poster beds with deep crimson hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner’s trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into bed; Seamus had pinned his Ireland rosette to his headboard, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was pinned right next to it.

“Mental,” Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely stationary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone - a house-elf, no doubt - had placed warming pans between the sheets. It was extremely comfortable, lying there in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

“I might go in for it, you know,” Ron said sleepily through the darkness, “if Fred and George find out how to. . . the tournament. . . you never know, do you?”

“S’pose not. . . .”

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures forming in his mind’s eye. . . . He had hoodwinked the impartial judge into believing he was seventeen. . . he

had become Hogwarts champion. . . he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, all of whom were applauding and screaming. . . he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration....

Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – MAD-EYE MOODY

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as Harry, Ron, and Hermione examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing magical methods of aging themselves and bluffing their way into the Triwizard Tournament.

"Today's not bad. . . outside all morning," said Ron, who was running his finger down the Monday column of his schedule. "Herbology with the Hufflepuffs and Care of Magical Creatures... damn it, we're still with the Slytherins. . . ."

"Double Divination this afternoon," Harry groaned, looking down. Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions. Professor Trelawney kept predicting Harry's death, which he found extremely annoying.

"You should have given it up like me, shouldn't you?" said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. "Then you'd be doing something sensible like Arithmancy."

"You're eating again, I notice," said Ron, watching Hermione adding liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

"I've decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights," said Hermione haughtily.

"Yeah. . . and you were hungry," said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail. Instinctively, Harry looked up, but there was no sign of white among the mass of brown and gray. The owls circled the tables, looking for the people to whom their letters and packages were addressed. A large tawny owl soared down to Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap - Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other side of the Hall Draco Malfoy's eagle owl had landed on his shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling of disappointment in his stomach, Harry returned to his porridge. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter?

His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but here he was distracted by Professor Sprout showing the class the ugliest plants Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," Professor Sprout told them briskly. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus -"

“The *what?*” said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

“Pus, Finnigan, pus,” said Professor Sprout, “and it’s extremely valuable, so don’t waste it. You will collect the pus, I say, in these bottles. Wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus.”

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth, which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

“This’ll keep Madam Pomfrey happy,” said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. “An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples.”

“Like poor Eloise Midgen,” said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. “She tried to curse hers off.”

“Silly girl,” said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. “But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end.”

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid’s small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

“Mornin’!” Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Be’er wait fer the Slytherins, they won’ want ter miss this - Blast-Ended Skrewts!”

“Come again?” said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

“Eurgh!” squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward. “Eurgh” just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry’s opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small *phut*, it would be propelled forward several inches.

“On’y jus’ hatched,” said Hagrid proudly, “so yeh’ll be able ter raise ‘em yerselves! Thought we’d make a bit of a project of it!”

“And why would we *want* to raise them?” said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle

were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

“I mean, what do they *do*?” asked Malfoy. “What is the *point* of them?”

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds’ pause, then he said roughly, “Tha’s next lesson, Malfoy. Yer jus’ feedin’ ‘em today. Now, yeh’ll wan’ ter try ‘em on a few diff’rent things - I’ve never had ‘em before, not sure what they’ll go fer - I got ant eggs an’ frog livers an’ a bit o’ grass snake - just try ‘em out with a bit of each.”

“First pus and now this,” muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry couldn’t suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn’t seem to have mouths.

“*Ouch!*” yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. “It got me.”

Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

“Its end exploded!” said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

“Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off,” said Hagrid, nodding.

“Eurgh!” said Lavender Brown again. “Eurgh, Hagrid, what’s that pointy thing on it?”

“Ah, some of ‘em have got stings,” said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). “I reckon they’re the males. . . . The females’ve got sorta sucker things on their bellies. . . . I think they might be ter suck blood.”

“Well, I can certainly see why we’re trying to keep them alive,” said Malfoy sarcastically. “Who wouldn’t want pets that can burn, sting, and bite all at once?”

“Just because they’re not very pretty, it doesn’t mean they’re not useful,” Hermione snapped. “Dragon blood’s amazingly magical, but you wouldn’t want a dragon for a pet, would you?”

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew only too well - he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal, the better.

“Well, at least the skrewts are small,” said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

“They are *now*,” said Hermione in an exasperated voice, “but once Hagrid’s found out what they eat, I expect they’ll be six feet long.”

“Well, that won’t matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will

it?” said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

“You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up,” said Hermione. “As a matter of fact I think he’s right. The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all.”

They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat so fast that Harry and Ron stared at her.

“Er - is this the new stand on elf rights?” said Ron. “You’re going to make yourself puke instead?”

“No,” said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. “I just want to get to the library.”

“*What?*” said Ron in disbelief. “Hermione - it’s the first day back! We haven’t even got homework yet!”

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet, said, “See you at dinner!” and departed at high speed.

When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a tightly spiraling staircase, a silver stepladder led to a circular trapdoor in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. As ever, the curtains were all closed; the circular room was bathed in a dim reddish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked through the mass of occupied chintz chairs and poufs that cluttered the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

“Good day,” said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large for her face, Professor Trelawney was peering down at Harry with the tragic expression she always wore whenever she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles glittered upon her person in the firelight.

“You are preoccupied, my dear,” she said mournfully to Harry. “My inner eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas. . . most difficult. . . I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass. . . and perhaps sooner than you think. . .”

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney swept past them and seated herself in a large winged armchair before the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply admired Professor Trelawney, were sitting on poufs very close to her.

“My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars,” she said. “The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents they reveal only to those who understand the steps of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle. . .“

But Harry’s thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney’s rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spellbound - though he couldn’t help thinking about what she had just said to him. *“I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass...”*

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn’t dreading anything at the moment at all. . . well, unless you counted his fears that Sirius had been caught. . . but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had long since come to the conclusion that her brand of fortunetelling was really no more than lucky guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again. . . and Dumbledore himself had said that he thought that trance had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him.

“Harry!” Ron muttered.

“What?”

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in the heat and his thoughts.

“I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn,” said Professor Trelawney, a faint note of resentment in her voice at the fact that he had obviously not been hanging on her words.

“Born under - what, sorry?” said Harry.

“Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!” said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely irritated that he wasn’t riveted by this news. “I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. . . . Your dark hair. . . your mean stature. . . tragic losses so young in life. . . I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?”

“No,” said Harry, “I was born in July.”

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth. It was dull work, requiring much consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

“I’ve got two Neptunes here,” said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, “that can’t be right, can it?”

“Aaaaah,” said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney’s mystical whisper, “when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sure sign that a midget in glasses is being born,

Harry. . . .“

Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeals from Lavender Brown - “Oh Professor, look! I think I’ve got an unsuspected planet! Oooh, which one’s that, Professor?”

“It is Uranus, my dear,” said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

“Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?” said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework at the end of the class.

“A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your personal chart,” she snapped, sounding much more like Professor McGonagall than her usual airy-fairy self. “I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!”

“Miserable old bat,” said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and dinner. “That’ll take all weekend, that will. . .”

“Lots of homework?” said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. “Professor Vector didn’t give *us* any at all!”

“Well, bully for Professor Vector,” said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

“Weasley! Hey, Weasley!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

“What?” said Ron shortly.

“Your dad’s in the paper, Weasley!” said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and speaking very loudly, so that everyone in the packed entrance hall could hear. “Listen to this!

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

It seems as though the Ministry of Magic’s troubles are not yet at an end, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.”

Malfoy looked up.

“Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It’s almost as though he’s a complete nonentity, isn’t it?” he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:

Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers (“policemen”) over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of “Mad-Eye” Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody’s heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer *Daily Prophet* questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

“And there’s a picture, Weasley!” said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. “A picture of your parents outside their house - if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with losing a bit of weight, couldn’t she?”

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

“Get stuffed, Malfoy,” said Harry. “C’mon, Ron. . .”

“Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren’t you, Potter?” sneered Malfoy. “So tell me, is his mother really that porky, or is it just the picture?”

“You know *your* mother, Malfoy?” said Harry - both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron’s robes to stop him from launching himself at Malfoy - “that expression she’s got, like she’s got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?”

Malfoy’s pale face went slightly pink.

“Don’t you dare insult my mother, Potter.”

“Keep your fat mouth shut, then,” said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed - Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face - he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he’d even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

“OH NO YOU DON’T, LADDIE!”

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His

wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry -- at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

“Did he get you?” Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

“No,” said Harry, “missed.”

“LEAVE IT!” Moody shouted.

“Leave - what?” Harry said, bewildered.

“Not you - him!” Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody’s rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

“I don’t think so!” roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again - it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

“I don’t like people who attack when their opponent’s back’s turned,” growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain. “Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do...”

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

“Never - do - that - again -“ said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced upward again.

“Professor Moody!” said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

“Hello, Professor McGonagall,” said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

“What - what are you doing?” said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret’s progress through the air.

“Teaching,” said Moody.

“Teach - Moody, *is that a student?*” shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

“Yep,” said Moody.

“No!” cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snapping noise, Draco Malfoy had reappeared, lying in a heap on the floor with his sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

“Moody, we *never* use Transfiguration as a punishment!” said Professor

McGonagall wealdy. “Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?”

“He might’ve mentioned it, yeah,” said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, “but I thought a good sharp shock -“

“We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender’s Head of House!”

“I’ll do that, then,” said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike.

Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and humiliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered something in which the words “my father” were distinguishable.

“Oh yeah?” said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull *clunk* of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. “Well, I know your father of old, boy... . You tell him Moody’s keeping a close eye on his son. . . you tell him that from me. . . . Now, your Head of House’ll be Snape, will it?”

“Yes,” said Malfoy resentfully.

“Another old friend,” growled Moody. “I’ve been looking forward to a chat with old Snape. . . . Come on, you. . .”

And he seized Malfoy’s upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.

“Don’t talk to me,” Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later, surrounded by excited talk on all sides about what had just happened.

“Why not?” said Hermione in surprise.

“Because I want to fix that in my memory forever,” said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. “Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret.”

Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began doling beef casserole onto each of their plates.

“He could have really hurt Malfoy, though,” she said. “It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it -“

“Hermione!” said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, “you’re ruining the best moment of my life!”

Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again.

“Don’t tell me you’re going back to the library this evening?” said Harry, watching her.

“Got to,” said Hermione thickly. “Loads to do.”

“But you told us Professor Vector -“

“It’s not schoolwork,” she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone than her seat was taken by Fred Weasley.

“Moody!” he said. “How cool is he?”

“Beyond cool,” said George, sitting down opposite Fred. “Supercool,” said the twins’ best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. “We had him this afternoon,” he told Harry and Ron.

“What was it like?” said Harry eagerly.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning.

“Never had a lesson like it,” said Fred.

“He *knows*, man,” said Lee.

“Knows what?” said Ron, leaning forward.

“Knows what it’s like to be out there *doing* it,” said George impressively.

“Doing what?” said Harry.

“Fighting the Dark Arts,” said Fred.

“He’s seen it all,” said George.

“Mazing,” said Lee.

Ron dived into his bag for his schedule.

“We haven’t got him till Thursday!” he said in a disappointed voice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Professor Snape, who seemed to have attained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer, gave Neville detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having been made to disembowel a barrel full of horned toads.

“You know why Snape’s in such a foul mood, don’t you?” said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville a Scouring Charm to remove the frog guts from under his fingernails.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Moody.”

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year running. Snape had disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it - but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, whenever Harry saw the two of them together - at mealtimes, or when they passed in the corridors - he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoiding Moody’s eye, whether magical or normal.

“I reckon Snape’s a bit scared of him, you know,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad,” said Ron, his eyes misting over, “and bounced him all around his dungeon...”

The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody’s first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursday lunchtime and queued up outside his classroom before the bell had even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

“Been in the -“

“Library.” Harry finished her sentence for her. “C’mon, quick, or we won’t get decent seats.”

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher’s desk, took out their copies of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*, and waited, unusually quiet. Soon they heard Moody’s distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

“You can put those away,” he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, “those books. You won’t need them.”

They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

“Right then,” he said, when the last person had declared themselves present, “I’ve had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you’ve had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures – you’ve covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?”

There was a general murmur of assent.

“But you’re behind - very behind - on dealing with curses,” said Moody. “So I’m here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I’ve got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark -“

“What, aren’t you staying?” Ron blurted out.

Moody’s magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled - the first time Harry had seen him do so. The effect was to make his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he ever did anything as friendly as smile. Ron looked deeply relieved.

“You’ll be Arthur Weasley’s son, eh?” Moody said. “Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. . . . Yeah, I’m staying just the one year. Special favor to Dumbledore. . . . One year, and then back to my quiet retirement.”

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

“So - straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I’m supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I’m not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you’re in the sixth year. You’re not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore’s got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope,

and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody's magical eye could see through solid wood, as well as out of the back of his head.

"So. . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron's and Hermione's. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magical eye was still fixed on Lavender.

"Er," said Ron tentatively, "my dad told me about one. . . Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father *would* know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius Curse."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were scuttling around inside it. Harry felt Ron recoil slightly next to him - Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. He then pointed his wand at it and muttered, "*Imperio!*"

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly, then did a back flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in circles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing - everyone except Moody.

"Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats. . ."

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse," said Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-powerful. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was

being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will.

“The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I’ll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone’s got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

“Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?”

Hermione’s hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry’s slight surprise, did Neville’s. The only class in which Neville usually volunteered information was Herbology which was easily his best subject. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

“Yes?” said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville.

“There’s one - the Cruciatus Curse,” said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

“Your name’s Longbottom?” he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further inquiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar for the next spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

“The Cruciatus Curse,” said Moody. “Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea,” he said, pointing his wand at the spider. “*Engorgio!*”

The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Abandoning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far away from Moody’s desk as possible.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and muttered, “*Crucio!*”

At once, the spider’s legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. No sound came from it, but Harry was sure that if it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder and jerk more violently - “Stop it!” Hermione said shrilly.”

Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville’s hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider’s legs relaxed, but it continued to twitch.

“*Reducio,*” Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

“Pain,” said Moody softly. “You don’t need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. . . . That one was very popular once too.

“Right. . . anyone know any others?”

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone’s faces, he guessed they were

all wondering what was going to happen to the last spider. Hermione's hand shook slightly as, for the third time, she raised it into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, looking at her.

"*Avada Kedavra*," Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

"Ah," said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and worst. *Avada Kedavra*. . . the Killing Curse."

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the jar, trying to evade Moody's fingers, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air - instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the spider skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and he's sitting right in front of me."

Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too. Harry stared at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all. . . .

So that was how his parents had died. . . exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they simply seen the flash of green light and heard the rush of speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had been murdered, ever since he'd found out what had happened that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. How Voldemort had killed Harry's father first. How James Potter had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run. . . Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, told her to move aside so that he could kill Harry. . . how she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son. . . and so Voldemort had murdered her too, before turning his wand on Harry.

Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had

fought the dementors last year - for that was the terrible power of the dementors: to force their victims to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair.

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

“*Avada Kedavra*’s a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it - you could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I’d get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn’t matter. I’m not here to teach you how to do it.

“Now, if there’s no countercurse, why am I showing you? *Because you’ve got to know*. You’ve got to appreciate what the worst is. You don’t want to find yourself in a situation where you’re facing it. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**” he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

“Now. . . those three curses - *Avada Kedavra*, Imperius, and Cruciatius - are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That’s what you’re up against. That’s what I’ve got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arming. But most of all, you need to practice *constant, never-ceasing vigilance*. Get out your quills. . . copy this down. . . “

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang - but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices - “Did you see it twitch?” “- and when he killed it - just like that!”

They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn’t found it very entertaining - and nor, it seemed, had Hermione.

“Hurry up,” she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

“Not the ruddy library again?” said Ron.

“No,” said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. “Neville.” Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatius Curse.

“Neville?” Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

“Oh hello,” he said, his voice much higher than usual. “Interesting lesson, wasn’t it? I wonder what’s for dinner, I’m - I’m starving, aren’t you?”

“Neville, are you all right?” said Hermione.

“Oh yes, I’m fine,” Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice. “Very interesting dinner - I mean lesson - what’s for eating?”

Ron gave Harry a startled look.

“Neville, what - ?“

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All four of them fell silent, watching him apprehensively, but when he spoke, it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

“It’s all right, sonny,” he said to Neville. “Why don’t you come up to my office? Come on. . . we can have a cup of tea. . . .“

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

“You all right, are you, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody’s blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, “You’ve got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, *but you’ve got to know*. No point pretending. . . well. . . come on, Longbottom, I’ve got some books that might interest you.”

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn’t say anything, so Neville had no choice but to allow himself to be steered away, one of Moody’s gnarled hands on his shoulder.

“What was that about?” said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione, looking pensive.

“Some lesson, though, eh?” said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. “Fred and George were right, weren’t they? He really knows his stuff, Moody, doesn’t he? When he did *Avada Kedavra*, the way that spider just *died*, just snuffed it right -“

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry’s face and didn’t speak again until they reached the Great Hall, when he said he supposed they had better make a start on Professor Trelawney’s predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron’s conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library again. Harry and Ron walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses himself.

“Wouldn’t Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Ministry if they knew we’d seen the curses?” Harry asked as they approached the Fat Lady.

“Yeah, probably,” said Ron. “But Dumbledore’s always done things his way, hasn’t he, and Moody’s been getting in trouble for years, I reckon. Attacks first and asks questions later - look at his dustbins. Balderdash.”

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into

the Gryffindor common room, which was crowded and noisy.

“Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?” said Harry.

“I s’pose,” Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading. He looked a good deal calmer than at the end of Moody’s lesson, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

“You all right, Neville?” Harry asked him.

“Oh yes,” said Neville, “I’m fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. . .”

He held up the book: *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*.

“Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I’m really good at Herbology,” Neville said. There was a faint note of pride in his voice that Harry had rarely heard there before. “He thought I’d like this.”

Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for Neville very rarely heard that he was good at anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of *Unfogging the Future* back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work on their predictions for the coming month. An hour later, they had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and Harry’s brain was as fogged as though it had been filled with the fumes from Professor Trelawney’s fire.

“I haven’t got a clue what this lot’s supposed to mean,” he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

“You know,” said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration, “I think it’s back to the old Divination standby.”

“What - make it up?”

“Yeah,” said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

“Next Monday,” he said as he scribbled, “I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter.” He looked up at Harry. “You know her - just put in loads of misery, she’ll lap it up.”

“Right,” said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years into the fire. “Okay. . . on Monday, I will be in danger of- er - burns.”

“Yeah, you will be,” said Ron darkly, “we’re seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, *I’ll*. . . erm. .

“Lose a treasured possession,” said Harry, who was flicking through *Unfogging the Future* for ideas.

“Good one,” said Ron, copying it down. “Because of... erm. . . Mercury. Why don’t you get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend?”

“Yeah. . . cool. . .” said Harry, scribbling it down, “because... Venus is in the twelfth house.”

“And on Wednesday, I think I’ll come off worst in a fight.”

“Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I’ll lose a bet.”

“Yeah, you’ll be betting I’ll win my fight. . .”

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room around them slowly emptied as people went up to bed. Crookshanks wandered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared inscrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look if she knew they weren’t doing their homework properly.

Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn’t yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting together against the opposite wall, heads together, quills out, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and working silently; they usually liked to be in the thick of things and the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, and Harry was reminded of how they had sat together writing something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, but it didn’t look like that this time; if it had been, they would surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament.

As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice that nevertheless carried across the almost deserted room, “No - that sounds like we’re accusing him. Got to be careful. . .”

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions - he didn’t want George to think he was eavesdropping. Shortly after that, the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the portrait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room carrying a sheaf of parchment in one hand and a box whose contents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

“Hello,” she said, “I’ve just finished!”

“So have I!” said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron’s predictions toward her.

“Not going to have a very good month, are you?” she said sardonically as

Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

“Ah well, at least I’m forewarned,” Ron yawned.

“You seem to be drowning twice,” said Hermione.

“Oh am I?” said Ron, peering down at his predictions. “I’d better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit obvious you’ve made these up?” said Hermione.

“How dare you!” said Ron, in mock outrage. “We’ve been working like house-elves here!”

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“It’s just an expression,” said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

“What’s in the box?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Funny you should ask,” said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron. She took off the lid and showed them the contents.

Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S. P. E .W.

“Spew?” said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. “What’s this about?”

“Not *spew*,” said Hermione impatiently. “It’s S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.”

“Never heard of it,” said Ron.

“Well, of course you haven’t,” said Hermione briskly, “I’ve only just started it.”

“Yeah?” said Ron in mild surprise. “How many members have you got?”

“Well - if you two join - three,” said Hermione.

“And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying ‘spew,’ do you?” said Ron.

“S-P-E-W!” said Hermione hotly. “I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status - but it wouldn’t fit. So that’s the heading of our manifesto.”

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

“I’ve been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it before now.”

“Hermione - open your ears,” said Ron loudly. “They. Like. It. They *like* being enslaved!”

“Our short-term aims,” said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn’t heard a word, “are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical

Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join - that buys a badge - and the proceeds can fund our leaflet campaign. You're treasurer, Ron - I've got you a collecting tin upstairs - and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying now, as a record of our first meeting."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and amusement at the look on Ron's face. The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft *tap, tap* on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

Harry –

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore - they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming *back*?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking perplexed. "Harry - what's up?"

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolting Hedwig out of his lap.

“I shouldn’t’ve told him!” Harry said furiously.

“What are you on about?” said Ron in surprise.

“It’s made him think he’s got to come back!” said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on the back of Ron’s chair, hooting indignantly. “Coming back, because he thinks I’m in trouble! And there’s nothing wrong with me! And I haven’t got anything for you,” Harry snapped at Hedwig, who was clicking her beak expectantly, “you’ll have to go up to the Owlery if you want food.”

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her outstretched wing as she went.

“Harry,” Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

“I’m going to bed,” said Harry shortly. “See you in the morning.”

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn’t feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry’s, fault. Why hadn’t he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds’ pain and he’d had to blab. . . . If he’d just had the sense to keep it to himself.

He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring up at the dark canopy of his bed. The dormitory was completely silent, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville’s usual snores meant that he was not the only one lying awake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it all night. He got up, dressed in the pale dawn light, left the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment from the table upon which his Divination homework still lay and wrote the following letter:

Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There’s no point coming back, everything’s fine here.

Don’t worry about me, my head feels completely normal.

Harry

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overturn a large vase on him halfway along the fourth-

floor corridor), finally arriving at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was entirely covered in straw, owl droppings, and the regurgitated skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on perches that rose right up to the top of the tower, nearly all of them asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a tawny, and hurried over to her, sliding a little on the dropping-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, showing him her tail. She was evidently still furious about his lack of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and that perhaps he would ask Ron to borrow Pigwidgeon, that made her stick out her leg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

“Just find him, all right?” Harry said, stroking her back as he carried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. “Before the dementors do.”

She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would ordinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring sort of way all the same. Then she spread her wings and took off into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of unease back in his stomach. He had been so sure that Sirius’s reply would alleviate his worries rather than increasing them.

“That was a *lie*, Harry,” said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. “You *didn’t* imagine your scar hurting and you know it.”

“So what?” said Harry. “He’s not going back to Azkaban because of me.”

“Drop it,” said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him, and fell silent.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next couple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking anxiously around every morning when the post owls arrived, nor, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horrible visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors down some dark London street, but between times he tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; nothing worked so well on a troubled mind as a good, hard training session. On the other hand, their lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody’s Defense Against the Dark Arts.

To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in turn, to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its effects.

“But - but you said it’s illegal, Professor,” said Hermione uncertainly as Moody

cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. “You said - to use it against another human was -“

“Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like,” said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her with an eerie, unblinking stare. “If you’d rather learn the hard way - when someone’s putting it on you so they can control you completely - fine by me. You’re excused. Off you go.”

He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning that she wanted to leave. Harry and Ron grinned at each other. They knew Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an important lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, his classmates did the most extraordinary things under its influence. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squirrel. Neville performed a series of quite astonishing gymnastics he would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, and each of them recovered only when Moody had removed it.

“Potter,” Moody growled, “you next.”

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand, pointed it at Harry, and said, *‘Imperio!’*

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him.

And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody’s voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: *Jump onto the desk. . . jump onto the desk. . .*

Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk....

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk....

No, I don’t think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly. . . no, I don’t really want to.

Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping - the result was that he’d smashed headlong into the desk knocking it over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

“Now, that’s more like it!” growled Moody’s voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. He remembered exactly what was happening, and the pain in his knees seemed to double.

“Look at that, you lot. . . Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We’ll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention - watch his eyes, that’s where you see it - very good, Potter, very good indeed! They’ll have trouble controlling *you!*”

“The way he talks,” Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had insisted on putting Harry through his paces four times in a row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), “you’d think we were all going to be attacked any second.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry, though Moody assured him the effects would wear off by lunchtime. “Talk about paranoid. . .” Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of earshot and went on. “No wonder they were glad to get shot of him at the Ministry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted ‘Boo’ behind him on April Fools’ Day? And when are we supposed to read up on resisting the Imperius Curse with everything else we’ve got to do?”

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall explained why, when the class gave a particularly loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

“You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!” she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously behind her square spectacles. “Your Ordinary Wizarding Levels are drawing closer --“

“We don’t take O.W.L.s till fifth year!” said Dean Thomas indignantly.

“Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the preparation you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person in this class who has managed to turn a hedgehog into a satisfactory pincushion. I might remind you that *your* pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a pin!”

Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their homework in their next Divination class. She read out large portions of their predictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them - but they were less amused when she asked them to do

the same thing for the month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century. Professor Snape was forcing them to research antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before Christmas to see if their antidote worked. Professor Flitwick had asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their “project,” suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their extraordinary behavior.

“I will not,” said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack. “I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks.”

Hagrid’s smile faded off his face.

“Yeh’ll do wha’ yer told,” he growled, “or I’ll be takin’ a leaf outta Professor Moody’s book. . . . I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy.”

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody’s punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting. Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was particularly satisfying, especially because Malfoy had done his very best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of students congregated there, all milling around a large sign that had been erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of them and read the sign aloud to the other two:

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT
THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND
DURMSTRANG WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O’CLOCK
ON FRIDAY THE 30TH OF OCTOBER. LESSONS WILL
END HALF AN HOUR EARLY --

“Brilliant!” said Harry. “It’s Potions last thing on Friday! Snape won’t have time to poison us all!”

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS
TO THEIR DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT
OF THE CASTLE TO GREET OUR GUESTS BEFORE
THE WELCOMING FEAST.

“Only a week away!” said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. “I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I’ll go and tell him. . . .”

“Cedric?” said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

“Diggory,” said Harry. “He must be entering the tournament.”

“That idiot, Hogwarts champion?” said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the staircase.

“He’s not an idiot. You just don’t like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch,” said Hermione. “I’ve heard he’s a really good student - *and* he’s a prefect.”

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

“You only like him because he’s *handsome*,” said Ron scathingly.

“Excuse me, I don’t like people just because they’re handsome!” said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like “*Lockhart!*”

The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked effect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the following week, there seemed to be only one topic of conversation, no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly contagious germs: who was going to try for Hogwarts champion, what the tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics.

Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

“Longbottom, kindly do *not* reveal that you can’t even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durmstrang!” Professor McGonagall barked at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for

Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually, they were sitting apart from everyone else and conversing in low voices. Ron led the way over to them.

"It's a bummer, all right," George was saying gloomily to Fred. "But if he won't talk to us in person, we'll have to send him the letter after all. Or we'll stuff it into his hand. He can't avoid us forever.

"Who's avoiding you?" said Ron, sitting down next to them.

"Wish you would," said Fred, looking irritated at the interruption.

"What's a bummer?" Ron asked George.

"Having a nosy git like you for a brother," said George.

"You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?" Harry asked. "Thought any more about trying to enter?"

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," said George bitterly. "She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon."

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" said Ron thoughtfully. "You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We've done dangerous stuff before. . . ."

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," said Fred. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they've done the tasks."

"Who are the judges?" Harry asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, "because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage."

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books she had, "It's all in *Hogwarts, A History*. Though, of course, that book's not *entirely* reliable. *A Revised History of Hogwarts* would be a more accurate title. Or *A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School*."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

"*House-elves!*" said Hermione, her eyes flashing. "Not once, in over a thousand pages, does *Hogwarts, A History* mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!"

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron's lack of enthusiasm had done nothing whatsoever to curb Hermione's determination to

pursue justice for house-elves.

True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet. Their Sickles had been wasted, however; if anything, they seemed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the badges, then to persuade others to do the same, and she had also taken to rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin under their noses.

“You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslaved?” she kept saying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely interested in his bacon (both twins had refused to buy a S.P.E.W. badge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

“Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?”

“No, of course not,” said Hermione curtly, “I hardly think students are supposed to -“

“Well, we have,” said George, indicating Fred, “loads of times, to nick food. And we’ve met them, and they’re *happy*. They think they’ve got the best job in the world -“

“That’s because they’re uneducated and brainwashed!” Hermione began hotly, but her next few words were drowned out by the sudden whooshing noise from overhead, which announced the arrival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abruptly; she and Ron watched Hedwig anxiously as she fluttered down onto Harry’s shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius’s reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred and George were safely immersed in further discussions about the Triwizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius’s letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I’m back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. Don’t use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don’t worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don’t forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

“Why d’you have to keep changing owls?” Ron asked in a low voice.

“Hedwig’ll attract too much attention,” said Hermione at once. “She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to wherever he’s hiding. . . I mean, they’re not native birds, are they?”

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, wondering whether he felt more or less worried than before. He supposed that Sirius managing to get back without being caught was something. He couldn’t deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he wouldn’t have to wait so long for a response every time he wrote.

“Thanks, Hedwig,” he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, then took off again, clearly desperate for a good long sleep in the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

“Weasley, straighten your hat,” Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. “Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair.”

Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

“Follow me, please,” said Professor McGonagall. “First years in front. . . no pushing.. .

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with anticipation among the other first years.

“Nearly six,” said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. “How d’you reckon they’re coming? The train?”

“I doubt it,” said Hermione.

“How, then? Broomsticks?” Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

“I don’t think so. . . not from that far away.. .

“A Portkey?” Ron suggested. “Or they could Apparate - maybe you’re allowed to do it under seventeen wherever they come from?”

“You can’t Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?” said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they’d hurry up. . . . Maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. . . . He remembered what Mr. Weasley had said back at the campsite before the Quidditch World Cup: “always the same - we can’t resist showing off when we get together. . .”

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers - “Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!”

“Where?” said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

“There!” yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick - or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks - was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

“It’s a dragon!” shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

“Don’t be stupid. . . it’s a flying house!” said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis’s guess was closer. . . . As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powderblue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed - then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year’s foot, the horses’ hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage - a shoe the size of a child’s sled - followed,

almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow - maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid - this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

“My dear Madame Maxime,” he said. “Welcome to Hogwarts.”

“Dumbly-dort,” said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. “I ‘ope I find you well?”

“In excellent form, I thank you,” said Dumbledore.

“My pupils,” said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime’s enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

“As Karkaroff arrived yet?” Madame Maxime asked.

“He should be here any moment,” said Dumbledore. “Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?”

“Warm up, I think,” said Madame Maxime. “But ze ‘orses -”

“Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them,” said Dumbledore, “the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other - er - charges.”

“Skrewts,” Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

“My steeds require - er - forceful ‘andling,” said Madame Maxime, looking as

though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. “Zey are very strong. . . .“

“I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job,” said Dumbledore, smiling.

“Very well,” said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. “Will you please inform zis ‘Agrid zat ze ‘orses drink only single-malt whiskey?”

“It will be attended to,” said Dumbledore, also bowing.

“Come,” said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

“How big d’you reckon Durmstrang’s horses are going to be?” Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

“Well, if they’re any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won’t be able to handle them,” said Harry. “That’s if he hasn’t been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what’s up with them?”

“Maybe they’ve escaped,” said Ron hopefully.

“Oh don’t say that,” said Hermione with a shudder. “Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. . . .“

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky.

For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime’s huge horses snorting and stamping. But then - “Can you hear something?” said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed.

“The lake!” yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. “Look at the lake!”

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water - except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks - and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake’s floor. .

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool. . . and then Harry saw the rigging....

“It’s a mast!” he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the

turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle... but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied. Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good... Viktor, come along, into the warmth... you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold..."

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn't need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry - *it's Krum!*"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – THE GOBLET OF FIRE

"I don't believe it!" Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from Durmstrang. "Krum, Harry! *Viktor Krum!*"

"For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"*Only a Quidditch player?*" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione - he's one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!"

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan jumping up and down on the soles of his feet to get a better look at the back of Krum's head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically searching their pockets as they walked - "Oh I don't believe it, I haven't got a single quill on me -"

“D’you think he’d sign my hat in lipstick?”

“*Really*,” Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

“*I’m* getting his autograph if I can,” said Ron. “You haven’t got a quill, have you, Harry?”

“Nope, they’re upstairs in my bag,” said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were still gathered around it, apparently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beauxbatons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were looking around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

“It’s not *that* cold,” said Hermione defensively. “Why didn’t they bring cloaks?”

“Over here! Come and sit over here!” Ron hissed. “Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space -“

“What?”

“Too late,” said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle looking very smug about this. As he watched, Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

“Yeah, that’s right, smarm up to him, Malfoy,” said Ron scathingly. “I bet Krum can see right through him, though. . . bet he gets people fawning over him all the time. . . Where d’you reckon they’re going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry. . . I wouldn’t mind giving him my bed, I could kip on a camp bed.”

Hermione snorted.

“They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot,” said Harry. The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. Harry was surprised to see that he added four chairs, two on either side of Dumbledore’s.

“But there are only two extra people,” Harry said. “Why’s Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?”

“Eh?” said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were

Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore's left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and - most particularly - guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

"No one's making you stay!" Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

"The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"

He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

"What's *that*?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's *French*," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there; perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts' robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were revealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heavily bandaged hand.

"Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found

a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's fingers."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore's speech. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blond hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

"Yeah, have *it*," said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yeah," Ron said breathlessly. "Yeah, it was excellent."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

"She's a *veela!*" he said hoarsely to Harry.

"Of course she isn't!" said Hermione tartly. "I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!"

But she wasn't entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys' heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

"I'm telling you, that's not a normal girl!" said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. "They don't make them like that at Hogwarts!"

"They make them okay at Hogwarts," said Harry without thinking. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away from the girl with the silvery hair.

"When you've both put your eyes back in," said Hermione briskly, "you'll be able to see who's just arrived."

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting on Professor Karkaroff's other side, while Mr. Crouch, Percy's boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

"What are *they* doing here?" said Harry in surprise.

"They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn't they?" said Hermione. "I suppose they wanted to be here to see it start."

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of

excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

“The moment has come,” said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. “The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket --“

“The what?” Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

“- just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation” - there was a smattering of polite applause - “and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply because he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard’s robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore’s long white hair and beard.

“Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions’ efforts.”

At the mention of the word “champions,” the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, “The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch.”

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else’s.

“The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman,” said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, “and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways.. their magical prowess - their daring - their powers of deduction - and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.”

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

“As you know, three champions compete in the tournament,” Dumbledore went

on calmly, “one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

“Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet,” said Dumbledore. “Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

“To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation,” said Dumbledore, “I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

“Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all.”

“An Age Line!” Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. “Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn’t it? And once your name’s in that goblet, you’re laughing - it can’t tell whether you’re seventeen or not!”

“But I don’t think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance,” said Hermione, “we just haven’t learned enough. . .“

“Speak for yourself,” said George shortly. “You’ll try and get in, won’t you, Harry?”

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore’s insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then the wonderful picture of himself winning the Triwizard Tournament filled his mind again. . . . He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen *did* find a way to get over the Age Line.

“Where is he?” said Ron, who wasn’t listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see what had become of Krum. “Dumbledore didn’t say where the Durmstrang people are sleeping, did he?”

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just bustled up to his students.

“Back to the ship, then,” he was saying. “Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine from the kitchens?”

Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on. “Professor, I would like some wine,” said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully.

“I wasn’t offering it to *you*, Poliakoff,” snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. “I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy -“

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Harry stopped to let him walk through first.

“Thank you,” said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him. And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. Behind their headmaster, the students from Durmstrang came to a halt too. Karkaroff’s eyes moved slowly up Harry’s face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry too. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw comprehension dawn on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and pointed openly at Harry’s forehead.

“Yeah, that’s Harry Potter,” said a growling voice from behind them.

Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang headmaster.

The color drained from Karkaroff’s face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

“You!” he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

“Me,” said Moody grimly. “And unless you’ve got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You’re blocking the doorway.”

It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting behind them, looking over one another’s shoulders to see what was causing the holdup.

Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they

usually did on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them eating toast, all examining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

“All the Durmstrang lot,” she replied. “But I haven’t seen anyone from Hogwarts yet.”

“Bet some of them put it in last night after we’d all gone to bed,” said Harry. “I would’ve if it had been me. . . wouldn’t have wanted everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbed you right back out again?”

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three of them looking extremely excited.

“Done it,” Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Just taken it.”

“What?” said Ron.

“The Aging Potion, dung brains,” said Fred.

“One drop each,” said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. “We only need to be a few months older.”

“We’re going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins,” said Lee, grinning broadly.

“I’m not sure this is going to work, you know,” said Hermione warningly. “I’m sure Dumbledore will have thought of this.”

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

“Ready?” Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. “C’mon, then - I’ll go first -“

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words *Fred Weasley - Hogwarts*. Fred walked right up to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked - George certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after Fred - but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they

had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione, also chortling, went in to breakfast.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students of seventeen or over who might be entering.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth."

Harry, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust.

"We can't have a Slytherin champion!"

"And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory," said Seamus contemptuously. "But I wouldn't have thought he'd have wanted to risk his good looks."

"Listen!" said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming into the Hall, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way. A tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, "Well, I've done it! Just put my name in!"

"You're kidding!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Are you seventeen, then?" asked Harry.

"Course she is, can't see a beard, can you?" said Ron.

"I had my birthday last week," said Angelina.

"Well, I'm glad someone from Gryffindor's entering," said Hermione. "I really hope you get it, Angelina!"

"Thanks, Hermione," said Angelina, smiling at her.

Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory, said Seamus, causing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily at him.

"What're we going to do today, then?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

“We haven’t been down to visit Hagrid yet,” said Harry.

“Okay,” said Ron, “just as long as he doesn’t ask us to donate a few fingers to the skrewts.”

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione’s face.

“I’ve just realized - I haven’t asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!” she said brightly. “Wait for me, will you, while I nip upstairs and get the badges?”

“What is it with her?” said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

“Hey, Ron,” said Harry suddenly. “It’s your friend. . .“

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girl. Those gathered around the Goblet of Fire stood back to let them pass, watching eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

“What d’you reckon’ll happen to the ones who aren’t chosen?” Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. “Reckon they’ll go back to school, or hang around to watch the tournament?”

“Dunno,” said Harry. “Hang around, I suppose... . Madame Maxime’s staying to judge, isn’t she?”

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

“Where are they sleeping, then?” said Ron, moving toward the front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione’s reappearance with the box of S. P. E.W. badges.

“Oh good, hurry up,” said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was now halfway across the lawn with Madame Maxime.

As they neared Hagrid’s cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the mystery of the Beauxbatons’ sleeping quarters was solved. The gigantic powder-blue carriage in which they had arrived had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid’s front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The elephantine flying horses that had pulled the carriage were now grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid’s door, and Fang’s booming barks answered instantly.

“Bout time!” said Hagrid, when he’d flung open the door. “Thought you lot’d forgotten where I live!”

“We’ve been really busy, Hag -“ Hermione started to say, but then she stopped dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently lost for words.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn’t the worst of it, though; he had evidently tried to tame his hair, using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches - perhaps he had tried a ponytail like Bill’s, but found he had too much hair. The look didn’t really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, obviously deciding not to comment, she said, “Erm - where are the skrewts.”

“Out by the pumpkin patch,” said Hagrid happily. “They’re get-tin’ massive, mus’ be nearly three foot long now. On’y trouble is, they’ve started killin’ each other.”

“Oh no, really?” said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid’s odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth to say something about it.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid sadly. “S’ okay, though, I’ve got ‘em in separate boxes now. Still got abou’ twenty.”

“Well, that’s lucky,” said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid’s cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A similarly enormous wooden table and chairs stood in front of the fire beneath the quantity of cured hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid started to make tea, and were soon immersed in yet more discussion of the Triwizard Tournament. Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

“You wait,” he said, grinning. “You jus’ wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh’ve never seen before. Firs’ task. . . ah, but I’m not supposed ter say.”

“Go on, Hagrid!” Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

“I don’ want ter spoil it fer yeh,” said Hagrid. “But it’s gonna be spectacular, I’ll tell yeh that. Them champions’re going ter have their work cut out. Never thought I’d live ter see the Triwizard Tournament played again!”

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn’t eat much - Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Hermione about house-elves - for he flatly refused to join

S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

“It’d be doin’ ‘em an unkindness, Hermione,” he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. “It’s in their nature ter look after humans, that’s what they like, see? Yeh’d be makin’ ‘em unhappy ter take away their work, an’ insutin’ ‘em if yeh tried ter pay ‘em.”

“But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!” said Hermione. “*And* we heard he’s asking for wages now!”

“Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I’m not sayin’ there isn’t the odd elf who’d take freedom, but yeh’ll never persuade most of ‘em ter do it - no, nothin’ doin’, Hermione.”

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the Halloween feast - and, more important, the announcement of the school champions.

“I’ll come with yeh,” said Hagrid, putting away his darning. “Jus’ give us a sec.”

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They didn’t pay too much attention until a truly horrible smell reached their nostrils. Coughing, Ron said, “Hagrid, what’s that?”

“Eh?” said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. “Don’ yeh like it?”

“Is that aftershave?” said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

“Er - eau de cologne,” Hagrid muttered. He was blushing.

“Maybe it’s a bit much,” he said gruffly. “I’ll go take it off, hang on...”

He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

“Eau de cologne?” said Hermione in amazement. “*Hagrid?*”

“And what’s with the hair and the suit?” said Harry in an undertone.

“Look!” said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window. Hagrid had just straightened up and turned ‘round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. Getting to their feet very cautiously, so that Hagrid wouldn’t spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons students had just emerged from their carriage, clearly about to set off for the feast too. They couldn’t hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapt, misty-eyed expression Harry had only ever seen him wear once before - when he had been looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

“He’s going up to the castle with her!” said Hermione indignantly. “I thought he was waiting for us!”

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, the Beaux-batons students following in their wake, jogging to keep up with their enormous strides.

“He fancies her!” said Ron incredulously. “Well, if they end up having children, they’ll be setting a world record - bet any baby of theirs would weigh about a ton.”

They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their cloaks more closely around themselves, they set off up the sloping lawns.

“Ooh it’s them, look!” Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff, and the other Durmstrang students were straggling along behind them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of Hermione, Ron, and Harry and proceeded through them.

When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore’s empty chair at the teachers’ table. Fred and George - clean-shaven again - seemed to have taken their disappointment fairly well.

“Hope it’s Angelina,” said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down.

“So do I!” said Hermione breathlessly. “Well, we’ll soon know!”

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn’t seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

“Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision,” said Dumbledore. “I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions’ names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber” - he indicated the door behind the staff table - “where they will be receiving their first instructions.”

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . .

“Any second,” Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it - the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm’s length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

“The champion for Durmstrang,” he read, in a strong, clear voice, “will be Viktor Krum.”

“No surprises there!” yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

“Bravo, Viktor!” boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. “Knew you had it in you!”

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone’s attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

“The champion for Beauxbatons,” said Dumbledore, “is Fleur Delacour!”

“It’s her, Ron!” Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

“Oh look, they’re all disappointed,” Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. “Disappointed” was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next...

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

“The Hogwarts champion,” he called, “is Cedric Diggory!”

“No!” said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the

next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real --"

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out -
"Harry Potter."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – THE FOUR CHAMPIONS

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bent his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said blankly. "You know I didn't."

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

"Harry Potter!" he called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. It felt like an immensely long walk; the top table didn't seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him, as though each were a searchlight. The

buzzing grew louder and louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

“Well. . . through the door, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He wasn’t smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers’ table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or give any of his usual signs of greeting. He looked completely astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture and into the one next to it, which contained a wizard with a walrus mustache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

“What is it?” she said. “Do zey want us back in ze Hall?”

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn’t know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there, looking at the three champions. It struck him how very tall all of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and led him forward.

“Extraordinary!” he muttered, squeezing Harry’s arm. “Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen. . . lady,” he added, approaching the fireside and addressing the other three. “May I introduce - incredible though it may seem - *the fourth* Triwizard champion?”

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Harry and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, “Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman.”

“Joke?” Bagman repeated, bewildered. “No, no, not at all! Harry’s name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!”

Krum’s thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still looking politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

“But evidently zair ‘as been a mistake,” she said contemptuously to Bagman. “E cannot compete. ‘E is too young.”

“Well. . . it is amazing,” said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. “But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name’s come out of the goblet. . . I mean, I don’t think there

can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . It's down in the rules, you're obliged. . . Harry will just have to do the best he --“

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall closed the door.

“Madame Maxime!” said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. “Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!”

Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. *Little boy?*

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled.

“What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?” she said imperiously. “I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore,” said Professor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. “*Two* Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions - or have I not read the rules carefully enough?”

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

“*C'est impossible*,” said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. “Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust.”

“We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore,” said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. “Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools.”

“It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff,” said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. “Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here --“

“Thank you, Severus,” said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his curtain of greasy black hair.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

“Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?” he asked calmly.

“No,” said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

“Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?” said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

“No,” said Harry vehemently.

“Ah, but of course ‘e is lying!” cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

“He could not have crossed the Age Line,” said Professor McGonagall sharply. “I am sure we are all agreed on that -“

“Dumbly-dorr must ‘ave made a mistake wiz ze line,” said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

“It is possible, of course,” said Dumbledore politely.

“Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!” said Professor McGonagall angrily. “Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I’m sure that should be good enough for everybody else!”

She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

“Mr. Crouch.. . Mr. Bagman,” said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, “you are our - er - objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?”

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

“We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament.”

“Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front,” said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

“I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students,” said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. “You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It’s only fair, Dumbledore.”

“But Karkaroff, it doesn’t work like that,” said Bagman. “The Goblet of Fire’s just gone out - it won’t reignite until the start of the next tournament -“

“- in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!” exploded Karkaroff. “After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!”

“Empty threat, Karkaroff,” growled a voice from near the door. “You can’t leave your champion now. He’s got to compete. They’ve all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?”

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud *clunk*.

“Convenient?” said Karkaroff. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you, Moody.”

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but his hands gave him away; they had balled themselves into fists.

“Don’t you?” said Moody quietly. “It’s very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter’s name in that goblet knowing he’d have to compete if it came out.”

“Evidently, someone ‘oo wished to give ‘Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!” said Madame Maxime.

“I quite agree, Madame Maxime,” said Karkaroff, bowing to her. “I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic *and* the International Confederation of Wizards -“

“If anyone’s got reason to complain, it’s Potter,” growled Moody, “but. . . funny thing. . . I don’t hear *him* saying a word. . .

“Why should ‘e complain?” burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. “E ‘as ze chance to compete, ‘asn’t ‘e? We ‘ave all been ‘oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money - zis is a chance many would die for!”

“Maybe someone’s hoping Potter *is* going to die for it,” said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, “Moody, old man. . . what a thing to say!”

“We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn’t discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime,” said Karkaroff loudly. “Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons.

“Imagining things, am I?” growled Moody. “Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy’s name in that goblet. . .

“Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?” said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

“Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!” said Moody. “It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament. . . I’m guessing they submitted Potter’s name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category. . . “

“You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody,” said Karkaroff coldly, “and a very ingenious theory it is - though of course, I heard you recently got it into your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk

egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock. So you'll understand if we don't take you entirely seriously. . . ."

"There are those who'll turn innocent occasions to their advantage," Moody retorted in a menacing voice. "It's my job to think the way Dark wizards do, Karkaroff - as you ought to remember..."

"Alastor!" said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized "Mad-Eye" could hardly be Moody's real first name. Moody fell silent, though still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction - Karkaroff's face was burning.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do. . .

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr -"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . ."

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin that had not been there at the Quidditch World Cup.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard. . . very important.

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.

"The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

“I think that’s all, is it, Albus?”

“I think so,” said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?”

“No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry,” said Mr. Crouch. “It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment.... I’ve left young Weatherby in charge... Very enthusiastic... a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told... .”

“You’ll come and have a drink before you go, at least?” said Dumbledore.

“Come on, Barry, I’m staying!” said Bagman brightly. “It’s all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!”

“I think not, Ludo,” said Crouch with a touch of his old impatience.

“Professor Karkaroff - Madame Maxime - a nightcap?” said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur’s shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

“Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed,” said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. “I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise.”

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

“So,” said Cedric, with a slight smile. “We’re playing against each other again!”

“I s’pose,” said Harry. He really couldn’t think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

“So... tell me... .” said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Goblet of Fire. “How *did* you get your name in?”

“I didn’t,” said Harry, staring up at him. “I didn’t put it in. I was telling the truth.”

“Ah... okay,” said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn’t believe him. “Well... . see you, then.”

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stone steps beyond it, then, slowly, he started to climb the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he’d put himself in for the tournament? Yet how could anyone think that, when he was facing competitors who’d had three years’ more magical education than he had - when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very dangerous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of people? Yes, he’d thought about it... he’d

fantasized about it. . . but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream. . . he'd never really, *seriously* considered entering. .

But someone else had considered it. . . someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? He didn't think so, somehow. . .

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. .

But to get him *killed*?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn't someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he had been a year old. . . Lord Voldemort. But how could Voldemort have ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant country, in hiding, alone. . . feeble and powerless. . .

Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone. . . he had been talking to Wormtail. . . plotting Harry's murder.

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how -"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least

it's a Gryffindor -“

“You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!” shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor Chasers.

“We've got food, Harry, come and have some -“

“I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast -“

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn't at all in the mood to celebrate. . . . Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn't get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. . . . Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet....

“I didn't,” he said, over and over again, “I don't know how it happened.”

But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

“I'm tired!” he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. “No, seriously, George - I'm going to bed -“

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be in the common room. Insisting that he needed to sleep, and almost flattening the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake everyone off and climb up to the dormitory as fast as he could.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

“Where've you been?” Harry said.

“Oh hello,” said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the scarlet Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. He hastened to take it off, but *it* was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed without moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

“So,” he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. “Congratulations.”

“What d'you mean, congratulations?” said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

“Well. . . no one else got across the Age Line,” said Ron. “Not even Fred and George. What did you use - the Invisibility Cloak?”

“The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have got me over that line,” said Harry slowly.

“Oh right,” said Ron. “I thought you might've told me if it was the cloak. . .

because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it? But you found another way, did you?"

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"What would they do that for?"

"I dunno," said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodramatic to say, "To kill me."

Ron's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

"It's okay, you know, you can tell *me* the truth," he said. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know why you're bothering to lie, you didn't get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's, that Violet, she's already told us all Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don't have to do end-of-year tests either. . ."

"I didn't put my name in that goblet!" said Harry, starting to feel angry.

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, in exactly the same sceptical tone as Cedric. "Only you said this morning you'd have done it last night, and no one would've seen you. . . I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're doing a really good impression of it," Harry snapped.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you'll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something."

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet curtains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would believe him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – THE WEIGHING OF THE WANDS

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and worried. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his own four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him - only to find that Ron's bed was empty; he had obviously gone down to breakfast.

Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the common room. The moment he appeared, the people who had already finished breakfast broke into applause again. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was not inviting; it was that, however, or stay here and allow himself to be cornered by the Creevey brothers, who were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely over to the

portrait hole, pushed it open, climbed out of it, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

“Hello,” she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. “I brought you this. . . . Want to go for a walk?”

“Good idea,” said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn toward the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

“Well, of course I knew you hadn’t entered yourself,” she said when he’d finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. “The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody’s right, Harry... I don’t think any student could have done it. . . they’d never be able to fool the Goblet, or get over Dumbledore’s -“

“Have you seen Ron?” Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

“Erm. . . yes. . . he was at breakfast,” she said.

“Does he still think I entered myself?”

“Well. . . no, I don’t think so . . . not *really*,” said Hermione awkwardly.

“What’s that supposed to mean, ‘not *really*’?”

“Oh Harry, isn’t it obvious?” Hermione said despairingly. “He’s jealous!”

“*Jealous?*” Harry said incredulously. “Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he?”

“Look,” said Hermione patiently, “it’s always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it’s not your fault,” she added quickly, seeing Harry open his mouth furiously. “I know you don’t ask for it. . . but - well - you know, Ron’s got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you’re his best friend, and you’re really famous - he’s always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many. . .

“Great,” said Harry bitterly. “Really great. Tell him from me I’ll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he’s welcome to it... People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go. . .”

“I’m not telling him anything,” Hermione said shortly. “Tell him yourself. It’s the only way to sort this out.”

“I’m not running around after him trying to make him grow up!” Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. “Maybe he’ll believe I’m

not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or –“

“That’s not funny,” said Hermione quietly. “That’s not funny at all.” She looked extremely anxious. “Harry, I’ve been thinking - you know what we’ve got to do, don’t you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?”

“Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the -“

“*Write to Sirius.* You’ve got to tell him what’s happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. . . . It’s almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me -“

“Come off it,” said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn’t be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. “He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He’ll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone’s entered me in the Triwizard Tournament -“

“*He’d want you to tell him,*” said Hermione sternly. “He’s going to find out anyway.”

“How?”

“Harry, this isn’t going to be kept quiet,” said Hermione, very seriously. “This tournament’s famous, and you’re famous. I’ll be really surprised if there isn’t anything in the *Daily Prophet* about you competing. . . . You’re already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know. . . and Sirius would rather hear it from you, I know he would.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll write to him,” said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it floating there for a moment, before a large tentacle rose out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

“Whose owl am I going to use?” Harry said as they climbed the stairs. “He told me not to use Hedwig again.”

“Ask Ron if you can borrow -“

“I’m not asking Ron for anything,” Harry said flatly.

“Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them,” said Hermione.

They went up to the Owlery. Hermione gave Harry a piece of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the long lines of perches, looking at all the different owls, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what’s happening at Hogwarts, so here goes - I don’t know if you’ve heard, but the Triwizard Tournament’s happening this year and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth

champion. I don't who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn't. The other Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff

He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say something about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to have settled inside his chest since last night, but he couldn't think how to translate this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,

Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak - Harry

"Finished," he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig fluttered down onto his shoulder and held out her leg.

"I can't use you," Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. "I've got to use one of these."

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry all the time he was tying his letter to the leg of a large barn owl. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and soared up into the rafters out of reach.

"First Ron, then you," Harry said angrily. "*This isn't my fault.*"

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons - and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin FinchFletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray - though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn't talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him - but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal

circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too - the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer. . . . Half the Triwizard champions have died. . . how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er - yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution, like. Harry - you come here an' help me with this big one...."

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, "So - yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"*One* of the champions," Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh - an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

"Wish I knew who *did* do it," said Harry bitterly.

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs - but

still without recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

“Look like they’re havin’ fun, don’ they?” Hagrid said happily. Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his classmates certainly weren’t; every now and then, with an alarming *bang*, one of the skrewts’ ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

“Ah, I don’ know, Harry,” Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. “School champion. . . everythin’ seems ter happen ter you, doesn’ it?”

Harry didn’t answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him. . . that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the lake, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

The next few days were some of Harry’s worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school’s behavior if he could just have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn’t going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn’t want to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

He could understand the Hufflepuffs’ attitude, even if he didn’t like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins - he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum’s autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Meanwhile there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney was predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he did so badly at Summoning Charms in Professor Flitwick’s class that he was given extra homework - the only person to get any, apart from Neville.

“It’s really not that difficult, Harry,” Hermione tried to reassure him as they left Flitwick’s class - she had been making objects zoom across the room to her all lesson, as though she were some sort of weird magnet for board dusters, wastepaper baskets, and lunascopes. “You just weren’t concentrating properly -“

“Wonder why that was,” said Harry darkly as Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls, all of whom looked at Harry as though he were a particularly large Blast-Ended Skrewt. “Still - never mind, eh? Double Potions to look forward to this afternoon. . .”

Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Friday’s worth, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning “ignore them, ignore them, ignore them” under her breath, and he couldn’t see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione arrived at Snape’s dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges - then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:

**SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY--
THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION!**

“Like them, Potter?” said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. “And this isn’t all they do - look!”

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

POTTER STINKS!

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message *POTTER STINKS* was shining brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

“Oh *very* funny,” Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, “really *witty*.”

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn’t laughing, but he wasn’t sticking up for Harry either.

“Want one, Granger?” said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione. “I’ve got loads. But don’t touch my hand, now. I’ve just washed it, you see; don’t want a Mudblood sliming it up.”

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had reached for his wand before he’d thought what he was doing. People all around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

“Harry!” Hermione said warningly.

“Go on, then, Potter,” Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand. “Moody’s not here to look after you now - do it, if you’ve got the guts -“

For a split second, they looked into each other’s eyes, then, at exactly the same time, both acted.

“*Funnunculus!*” Harry yelled.

“*Densaugeo!*” screamed Malfoy.

Jets of light shot from both wands, hit each other in midair, and ricocheted off at angles -- Harry’s hit Goyle in the face, and Malfoy’s hit Hermione. Goyle bellowed and put his hands to his nose, where great ugly boils were springing up - Hermione, whimpering in panic, was clutching her mouth.

“Hermione!”

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione’s hand away from her face. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Hermione’s front teeth - already larger than average - were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, toward her chin - panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

“And what is all this noise about?” said a soft, deadly voice.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, “Explain.”

“Potter attacked me, sir -“

“We attacked each other at the same time!” Harry shouted.

“- and he hit Goyle - look -“

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous fungi.

“Hospital wing, Goyle,” Snape said calmly.

“Malfoy got Hermione!” Ron said. “*Look!*”

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth - she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had now grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape’s back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, “I see no difference.”.

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

“Let’s see,” he said, in his silkiest voice. “Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it’ll be a week’s worth of detentions.”

Harry’s ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too - for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. *POTTER STINKS* flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. . . . If only he knew how to do the Cruciatius Curse. . . he’d have Snape flat on his back like that spider, jerking and twitching.

“Antidotes!” said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. “You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. . .”

Snape’s eyes met Harry’s, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison *him*. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron, and sprinting to the front of the class, and bringing it down on Snape’s greasy head - And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry’s thoughts.

It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape’s desk at the front of the room.

“Yes?” said Snape curtly.

“Please, sir, I’m supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs.” Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

“Potter has another hour of Potions to complete,” said Snape coldly. “He will come upstairs when this class is finished.”

Colin went pink.

“Sir - sir, Mr. Bagman wants him,” he said nervously. “All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photographs. . .”

Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the

ceiling.

“Very well, very well,” Snape snapped. “Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote.”

“Please, sir - he’s got to take his things with him,” squeaked Cohn. “All the champions...”

“Very *well!*” said Snape. “Potter - take your bag and get out of my sight!”

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, *POTTER STINKS* flashed at him from every direction.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it, Harry?” said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. “Isn’t it, though? You being champion?”

“Yeah, really amazing,” said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. “What do they want photos for, Colin?”

“The *Daily Prophet*, I think!”

“Great,” said Harry dully. “Exactly what I need. More publicity.”

“Good luck!” said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle; three of them, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation. Fleur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

“Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come... nothing to worry about, it’s just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment -“

“Wand weighing?” Harry repeated nervously.

“We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they’re your most important tools in the tasks ahead,” said Bagman. “The expert’s upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there’s going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter,” he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. “She’s doing a small piece on the tournament for the *Daily Prophet*. ...“

“Maybe not *that* small, Ludo,” said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry.

Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

“I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?” she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. “The youngest champion, you know. . . to add a bit of color?”

“Certainly!” cried Bagman. “That is - if Harry has no objection?”

“Er -“ said Harry.

“Lovely,” said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry’s upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was steering him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

“We don’t want to be in there with all that noise,” she said. “Let’s see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy.”

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

“Come along, dear - that’s right - lovely,” said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, pushing Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness. “Let’s see now. . .”

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair, so that they could see what they were doing.

“You won’t mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. . .”

“A what?” said Harry.

Rita Skeeter’s smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

“Testing. . . my name is Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet* reporter.”

Harry hooked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, who’s savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations –

“Lovely,” said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment

off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, "So, Harry... what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Er --" said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes --

"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly Harry looked up at her instead. "Now -- why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in there."

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered at all. But don't worry about that. Our readers love a rebel."

"But I didn't enter," Harry repeated. "I don't know who --"

"How do you feel about the tasks ahead?" said Rita Skeeter. "Excited? Nervous?"

"I haven't really thought. . . yeah, nervous, I suppose," said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

"Champions have died in the past, haven't they?" said Rita Skeeter briskly. "Have you thought about that at all?"

"Well. . . they say it's going to be a lot safer this year," said Harry.

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

"Of course, you've looked death in the face before, haven't you?" said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. "How would you say that's affected you?"

"Er," said Harry, yet again.

"Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because --"

"I didn't enter," said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

"Can you remember your parents at all?" said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

"No," said Harry.

"How do you think they'd feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard

Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?”

Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Frowning, he avoided her gaze and hooked down at words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

“I have NOT got tears in my eyes!” said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

“*Dumbledore!*” cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight - but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment had suddenly vanished from the box of Magical Mess Remover, and Rita’s clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. “How are you?” she said, standing up and holding out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. “I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards’ Conference?”

“Enchantingly nasty,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat.”

Rita Skeeter didn’t look remotely abashed.

“I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbhedore, and that many wizards in the street –“

“I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita,” said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile, “but I’m afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard.”

Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Cedric, hooking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting - Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on the parchment.

“May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?” said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges’ table and talking to the champions. “He will be checking your wands to ensure

that they are in good condition before the tournament.”

Harry hooked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr. Ollivander before - he was the wand-maker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley.

“Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?” said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Ollivander and handed him her wand.

“Hmm...” he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and examined it carefully.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “nine and a half inches. . . inflexible.. rosewood.. . and containing. . . dear me. . .“

“An ‘air from ze ‘ead of a veela,” said Fleur. “One of my grandmuzzer’s.”

So Fleur *was* part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron. . . then he remembered that Ron wasn’t speaking to him.

“Yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, “yes, I’ve never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands...however, to each his own, and if this suits you..”

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, “*Orchideous!*” and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip.

“Very well, very well, it’s in fine working order,” said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. “Mr. Diggory, you next.”

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

“Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn’t it?” said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. “Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn. . . must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches. . . ash. . . pleasantly springy. It’s in fine condition...You treat it regularly?”

“Polished it last night,” said Cedric, grinning.

Harry hooked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knee and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric’s wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then said, “Mr. Krum, if you please.”

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr.

Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

“Hmm,” said Mr. Ollivander, “this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I’m much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I . . . however. . .”

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

“Yes. . . hornbeam and dragon heartstring?” he shot at Krum, who nodded. “Rather thicker than one usually sees. . . quite rigid. . . ten and a quarter inches. . . *Avis!*”

The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight.

“Good,” said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. “Which leaves. . . Mr. Potter.”

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

“Aaaah, yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming. “Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember.”

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday....

Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander’s shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had taken his measurements and then started handing him wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him - this one, which was made of holly, eleven inches long, and contained a single feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so compatible with this wand. “Curious,” he had said, “curious,” and not until Harry asked what was curious had Mr. Ollivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry’s wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort’s.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned its relation to Voldemort’s wand was something it couldn’t help - rather as he couldn’t help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander wasn’t about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter’s Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry’s wand than anyone else’s. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

“Thank you all,” said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges’ table. “You may go back to your lessons now - or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as

they are about to end –“

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

“Photos, Dumbledore, photos!” cried Bagman excitedly. “All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?”

“Er - yes, let’s do those first,” said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. “And then perhaps some individual shots.”

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn’t stand far enough back to get her into the frame; eventually she had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, they were free to go.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn’t there - he supposed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He ate alone at the end of the table, then returned to Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came across Ron.

“You’ve had an owl,” said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry’s pillow. The school barn owl was waiting for him there.

“Oh - right,” said Harry.

“And we’ve got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape’s dungeon,” said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him - he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing - but the lure of Sirius’s answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter off its leg, and unrolled it.

Harry –

I can’t say everything I would like to in a letter, it’s too risky in case the owl is intercepted - we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o’clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself and while you’re around Dumbledore and Moody I don’t think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially

right under Dumbklore's nose.

Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

Sirius

CHAPTER NINETEEN – THE HUNGARIAN HORNTAIL

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot on a horizon that had never looked darker. The shock of finding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. The first task was drawing steadily nearer; he felt as though it were crouching ahead of him like some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suffered nerves like these; they were way beyond anything he had experienced before a Quidditch match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finding it hard to think about the future at all; he felt as though his whole life had been heading up to, and would finish with, the first task.

Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of difficult and dangerous magic in front of hundreds of people, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he would be beside the common room fire at the time Sirius had suggested; and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the night in question. If the worst came to the worst, they were going to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that - Filch would skin them alive.

In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. . . . Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it. . . . I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. . .

But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his "er's" into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed other people about him too.

Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people -- Slytherins, mainly -- quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfiguration?"

"Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter? Or is this a school you and Longbottom have set up together?"

"Hey - Harry!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough. "I've just been crying my eyes out over my dead mum, and I'm just off to do a bit more. . .

"No - it was just - you dropped your quill."

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

"Oh - right - sorry," he muttered, taking the quill back.

"Er. . . good luck on Tuesday," she said. "I really hope you do well."

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupid.

Hermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn't yet started yelling at innocent bystanders; in fact, Harry was full of admiration for the way she was handling the situation.

"*Stunningly pretty? Her?*" Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after Rita's article had appeared. "What was she judging against - a chipmunk?"

"Ignore it," Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls as though she couldn't hear them. "Just ignore it, Harry."

But Harry couldn't ignore it. Ron hadn't spoken to him at all since he had told

him about Snape's detentions. Harry had half hoped they would make things up during the two hours they were forced to pickle rats' brains in Snape's dungeon, but that had been the day Rita's article had appeared, which seemed to have confirmed Ron's belief that Harry was really enjoying all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other, but Harry was adamant: He would talk to Ron again only if Ron admitted that Harry hadn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire and apologized for calling him a liar.

"I didn't start this," Harry said stubbornly. "It's his problem."

"You miss him!" Hermione said impatiently. "And I *know* he misses you -"

"*Miss him?*" said Harry. "I don't *miss him*. . .

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn't the same as Ron. There was much less laughter and a lot more hanging around in the library when Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn't mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something of a block about them, and Hermione insisted that learning the theory would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he looking for things to help him through the first task? Hermione often complained about Krum being there - not that he ever bothered them - but because groups of giggling girls often turned up to spy on him from behind bookshelves, and Hermione found the noise distracting.

"He's not even good-looking!" she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum's sharp profile. "They only like him because he's famous! They wouldn't look twice at him if he couldn't do that WonkyFaint thing -"

"Wronski Feint," said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him another pang to imagine Ron's expression if he could have heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disobliging habit of speeding up. The days until the first task seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry's feeling of barely controlled panic was with him wherever he went, as everpresent as the snide comments about the *Daily Prophet* article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Hermione told Harry that it would do him good to get away from the castle for a bit, and Harry didn't need much persuasion.

"What about Ron, though?" he said. "Don't you want to go with him?"

“Oh. . . well. . .” Hermione went slightly pink. “I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. . . .”

“No,” said Harry flatly.

“Oh Harry, this is so stupid -“

“I’ll come, but I’m not meeting Ron, and I’m wearing my Invisibility Cloak.”

“Oh all right then. . .” Hermione snapped, “but I hate talking to you in that cloak, I never know if I’m looking at you or not.”

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for Hogsmeade.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village, most of them sporting *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges, but no horrible remarks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

“People keep looking at *me* now,” said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating large cream-filled chocolates. “They think I’m talking to myself.”

“Don’t move your lips so much then.”

“Come *on*, please just take off your cloak for a bit, no one’s going to bother you here.”

“Oh yeah?” said Harry. “Look behind you.”

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they passed right by Hermione without hooking at her. Harry backed into the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry said, “She’s staying in the village. I bet she’s coming to watch the first task.”

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn’t mention this; he and Hermione hadn’t discussed what was coming in the first task much; he had the feeling she didn’t want to think about it.

“She’s gone,” said Hermione, looking right through Harry toward the end of the street. “Why don’t we go and have a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, it’s a bit cold, isn’t it? You don’t have to talk to Ron!” she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts students enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of magical people Harry rarely saw anywhere else. Harry supposed that as Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were not as adept as wizards at disguising themselves.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you

accidentally trod on someone, which tended to lead to awkward questions. Harry edged slowly toward a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Resisting the urge to give Ron a good hard poke in the back of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butterbeer under his cloak.

"I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own," she muttered. "Lucky I brought something to do."

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron's names at the top of the very short list. It seemed a long time ago that they had sat making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretary and treasurer.

"You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers involved in S.P.E.W.," Hermione said thoughtfully, looking around the pub.

"Yeah, right," said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his cloak. "Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?"

"When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!" she hissed back. "You know, I'm starting to think it's time for more direct action. I wonder how you get into the school kitchens?"

"No idea, ask Fred and George," said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of them looked cheerful and relaxed. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table; both of them sporting *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges on their cloaks. Right over by the door he saw Cho and a large group of her Ravenclaw friends. She wasn't wearing a Cedric badge though. . . . This cheered up Harry very slightly.

What wouldn't he have given to be one of these people, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about but homework? He imagined how it would have felt to be here if his name *hadn't* come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn't be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron would be sitting with him. The three of them would probably be happily imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He'd have been really hooking forward to it, watching them do whatever it was...cheering on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands...

He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by admirers and looking nervous but excited. Harry glimpsed Fleur Delacour from time to time in the corridors; she looked exactly as

she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just sat in the library, poring over books.

Harry thought of Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in just over twelve hours, for tonight was the night they were meeting at the common room fire - assuming nothing went wrong, as everything else had done lately...

“Look, it’s Hagrid!” said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid’s enormous shaggy head - he had mercifully abandoned his bunches - emerged over the crowd. Harry wondered why he hadn’t spotted him at once, as Hagrid was so large, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual enormous tankard in front of him, but Moody was drinking from his hip flask. Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn’t seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody as she collected glasses from tables around them. Perhaps she thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that he preferred to prepare his own food and drink at all times, as it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn’t see him. Moody, however, paused, his magical eye on the corner where Harry was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to him, and then the pair of them made their way back across the pub toward Harry and Hermione’s table.

“All right, Hermione?” said Hagrid loudly.

“Hello,” said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered, “Nice cloak, Potter.”

Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody’s nose was particularly obvious at a few inches’ distance. Moody grinned.

“Can your eye - I mean, can you - ?“

“Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks,” Moody said quietly. “And it’s come in useful at times, I can tell you.”

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn’t see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid now bent down on the pretext of reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, “Harry, meet me tonight at midnight at me cabin. Wear that cloak.”

Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, “Nice ter see yeh, Hermione,” winked, and departed. Moody followed him.

“Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?” Harry said, very surprised.

“Does he?” said Hermione, looking startled. “I wonder what he’s up to? I don’t know whether you should go, Harry. . . .” She looked nervously around and hissed, “It might make you late for Sirius.”

It was true that going down to Hagrid’s at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione suggested sending Hedwig down to Hagrid’s to tell him he couldn’t go - always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course - Harry, however, thought it better just to be quick at whatever Hagrid wanted him for. He was very curious to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself and crept back downstairs through the common room. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges and were trying to bewitch them to make them say *Support Harry Potter!* instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on *POTTER STINKS*. Harry crept past them to the portrait hole and waited for a minute or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned. He slipped past her with a whispered “Thanks!” and set off through the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid’s cabin. The inside of the enormous Beauxbatons carriage was also lit up; Harry could hear Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid’s front door.

“You there, Harry?” Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

“Yeah,” said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the cloak down off his head. “What’s up?”

“Got summat ter show yeh,” said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized artichoke in his buttonhole. It looked as though he had abandoned the use of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair - Harry could see the comb’s broken teeth tangled in it.

“What’re you showing me?” Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy another giant three-headed dog off a stranger in a pub.

“Come with me, keep quiet, an’ keep yerself covered with that cloak,” said Hagrid. “We won’ take Fang, he won’ like it. . .

“Listen, Hagrid, I can’t stay long. . . . I’ve got to be back up at the castle by one o’clock -“

But Hagrid wasn’t listening; he was opening the cabin door and striding off into

the night. Harry hurried to follow and found, to his great surprise, that Hagrid was leading him to the Beauxbatons carriage.

“Hagrid, what - ?“

“Shhh!” said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Hagrid.

“Ah, ‘Agrid . . . it is time?”

“Bong-sewer,” said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the paddock containing Madame Maxime’s giant winged horses, with Harry, totally bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her any old time he wanted.. . she wasn’t exactly hard to miss....

But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, “Wair is it you are taking me, ‘Agrid?”

“Yeh’ll enjoy this,” said Hagrid gruffly, “worth seein’, trust me. On’y - don’ go tellin’ anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh’re not s’posed ter know.”

“Of course not,” said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every now and then. Hagrid had some harebrained scheme in hand, which might make him miss Sirius. If they didn’t get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle, and leave Hagrid to enjoy his moonlit stroll with Madame Maxime.

But then - when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight – Harry heard something. Men were shouting up ahead. . . then came a deafening, earsplitting roar. . .

Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them - for a split second, he thought he was seeing bonfires, and men darting around them - and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting - torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine

gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others, which was nearest to them.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to heavy leather straps around their necks and legs. Mesmerized, Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging with either fear or rage, he couldn't tell which. . . . It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream.

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. "They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!"

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

"*Stupefy!*" they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of stars on the dragons' scaly hides –

Harry watched the dragon nearest to them teeter dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl; its nostrils were suddenly devoid of flame, though still smoking - then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could have sworn made the trees behind him quake.

The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a small hill. They hurried to tighten the chains and fasten them securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

"Wan' a closer look?" Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry followed. The wizard who had warned Hagrid not to come any closer turned, and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

"All right, Hagrid?" he panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now - we put them out with a Sleeping Draft on the way here, thought it might be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet - but, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all -"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the black one, with something close to reverence. Its eyes were still just open. Harry could see a strip of gleaming yellow beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail," said Charlie. "There's a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one -- a Swedish Short-Snout, that blue-gray -- and a Chinese Fireball, that's the red."

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the stunned dragons.

“I didn’t know you were bringing her, Hagrid,” Charlie said, frowning. “The champions aren’t supposed to know what’s coming - she’s bound to tell her student, isn’t she?”

“Jus’ thought she’d like ter see ‘em,” shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

“Really romantic date, Hagrid,” said Charlie, shaking his head.

“Four. . .“ said Hagrid, “so it’s one fer each o’ the champions, is it? What’ve they gotta do - fight ‘em?”

“Just get past them, I think,” said Charlie. “We’ll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nesting mothers, I don’t know why. . . but I tell you this, I don’t envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end’s as dangerous as its front, look.”

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail’s tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches.

Five of Charlie’s fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket. They placed them carefully at the Horntail’s side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

“I’ve got them counted, Hagrid,” said Charlie sternly. Then he said, “How’s Harry?”

“Fine,” said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

“Just hope he’s still fine after he’s faced this lot,” said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons’ enclosure. “I didn’t dare tell Mum what he’s got to do for the first task; she’s already having kittens about him. . . .“ Charlie imitated his mother’s anxious voice. *“How could they let him enter that tournament, he’s much too young! I thought they were all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!”* She was in floods after that *Daily Prophet* article about him. *‘He still cries about his parents! Oh bless him, I never knew!’*”

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn’t miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle.

He didn’t know whether he was glad he’d seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock was over now. Maybe if he’d seen the dragons for the first time on Tuesday, he would have passed out cold in front of the whole school. . . but maybe he would anyway. . . . He was going to be armed with his wand - which, just now, felt like nothing more than a narrow strip of wood -- against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get past it. With everyone watching. *How?*

Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to

get back to the fireside and talk to Sirius, and he couldn't remember, ever, wanting to talk to someone more than he did right now -- when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the cloak around him. A voice nearby said, "Ouch! Who's there?"

Harry hastily checked that the cloak was covering him and lay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard he had hit. He recognized the goatee. . . it was Karkaroff.

"Who's there?" said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. After a minute or so, Karkaroff seemed to decide that he had hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though expecting to see a dog. Then he crept back under the cover of the trees and started to edge forward toward the place where the dragons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise, hurrying through the darkness back toward Hogwarts.

He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was going to be. He might even have spotted Hagrid and Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together - they were hardly difficult to spot at a distance. . . and now all Karkaroff had to do was follow the sound of voices, and he, like Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath, but he didn't dare slow down. . . . He had less than five minutes to get up to the fire.

"Balderdash!" he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

"If you say so," she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry climbed inside. The common room was deserted, and, judging by the fact that it smelled quite normal, Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius got privacy.

Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness; the flames were the only source of light. Nearby, on a table, the *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. They now read *POTTER REALLY STINKS*. Harry looked back into the flames, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Diggory do exactly

this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have scared him out of his wits. Instead, his face breaking into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius - how're you doing?"

Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and sunken, surrounded by a quantity of long, black, matted hair - but the hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him, which had been taken at the Potters' wedding.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm -" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" - but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking more than he'd talked in days - about how no one believed he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the *Daily Prophet*, how he couldn't walk down a corridor without being sneered at - and about Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy...

". . . and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished desperately.

Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them - that deadened, haunted look. He had let Harry talk himself into silence without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute - I haven't got long here. . . I've broken into a wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches. . . Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons coming?

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes - he - what?"

"He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year - to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said slowly - his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shocking information. "Why did they release him?"

"He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic," said Sirius bitterly. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he named names. . . he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place. . . . He's not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But. . . are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the

goblet? Because if he did, he's a really good actor. He seemed furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now, I've been keeping an eye on the *Daily Prophet*, Harry.."

"- you and the rest of the world," said Harry bitterly.

"- and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"So. . . what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But - why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've been hearing some very strange things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark. . . and then - did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Bertha Jorkins?" said Harry.

"Exactly. . . she disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last. . . and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah, but. . . it's not very likely she'd have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?" said Harry.

"Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

"So. . . so Voldemort could have found out about the tournament?" said Harry. "Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff might be here on his orders?"

"I don't know," said Sirius slowly, "I just don't know...Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it hook like an accident."

“Looks like a really good plan from where I’m standing,” said Harry grinning bleaky. “They’ll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff.”

“Right - these dragons,” said Sirius, speaking very quickly now. “There’s a way, Harry. Don’t be tempted to try a Stunning Spell - dragons are strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon -“

“Yeah, I know, I just saw,” said Harry.

“But you can do it alone,” said Sirius. “There is away, and a simple spell’s all you need. Just -“

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps coming down the spiral staircase behind him.

“Go!” he hissed at Sirius. “Go! There’s someone coming!”

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire - if someone saw Sirius’s face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would raise an almighty uproar - the Ministry would get dragged in - he, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius’s whereabouts –

Harry heard a tiny *pop!* in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase. Who had decided to go for a stroll at one o’clock in the morning, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

“Who were you talking to?” he said.

“What’s that got to do with you?” Harry snarled. “What are you doing down here at this time of night?”

“I just wondered where you -“ Ron broke off, shrugging. “Nothing. I’m going back to bed.”

“Just thought you’d come nosing around, did you?” Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he’d walked in on, knew he hadn’t done it on purpose, but he didn’t care - at this moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajama trousers.

“Sorry about that,” said Ron, his face reddening with anger. “Should’ve realized you didn’t want to be disturbed. I’ll let you get on with practicing for your next interview in peace.”

Harry seized one of the *POTTER REALLY STINKS* badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room. It hit Ron on the forehead and bounced off.

“There you go,” Harry said. “Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if you’re lucky. . . . That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he

would even have liked Ron to throw a punch at him, but Ron just stood there in his too-small pajamas, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward and didn't hear him come up to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY – THE FIRST TASK

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inattentively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to pull his hat onto his foot instead of his sock. When he'd finally got all his clothes on the right parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, where she was eating breakfast with Ginny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her out onto the grounds. There, he told her all about the dragons, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more pressing problem.

"Let's just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening," she said desperately, "and then we can worry about Karkaroff."

They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. Nothing whatsoever occurred to them, so they retired to the library instead. Here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through the large pile.

"Talon-clipping by charms. . . treating scale-rot. . ." This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep them healthy. . .

"Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate. . ." But Sirius said a simple one would do it. . .

"Let's try some simple spellbooks, then," said Harry, throwing aside *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*.

He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione whispering nonstop at his elbow.

"Well, there are Switching Spells. . . but what's the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums or something that would make it less dangerous. . . . The trouble is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon's hide. . . . I'd say Transfigure it, but something that big, you really haven't got a hope, I doubt even Professor McGonagall. . . unless you're supposed to put the spell on *yourself*? Maybe to give yourself extra powers? But *they're* not simple spells, I mean, we haven't done any of those in class, I only know about them because I've been doing O.W.L. practice papers. . . ."

"Hermione," Harry said, through gritted teeth, "will you shut up for a bit, please?"

I m trying to concentrate.”

But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry’s brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn’t seem to allow room for concentration. He stared hopelessly down the index of *Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping*. . . but dragons had no hair. . . *pepper breath*. . . that would probably increase a dragon’s firepower. . . *horn tongue*. . . just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon...

“Oh no, he’s back *again*, why can’t he read on his stupid ship?” said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, cast a surly look over at the pair of them, and settled himself in a distant corner with a pile of books. “Come on, Harry, we’ll go back to the common room. . . his fan club’ll be here in a moment, twittering away... .“

And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her waist.

Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morning, he seriously considered for the first time ever just running away from Hogwarts. But as he looked around the Great Hall at breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn’t do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy. . . well, he supposed he must have been happy with his parents too, but he couldn’t remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and facing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was good to know; it made him feel slightly calmer. He finished his bacon with difficulty (his throat wasn’t working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the Hufflepuff table.

Cedric still didn’t know about the dragons. . . the only champion who didn’t, if Harry was right in thinking that Maxime and Karkaroff would have told Fleur and Krum....

“Hermione, I’ll see you in the greenhouses,” Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall. “Go on, I’ll catch you up.”

“Harry, you’ll be late, the bell’s about to ring -“

“I’ll catch you up, okay?”

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year friends. Harry didn’t want to talk to Cedric in front of them; they were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter’s article at him every time he went near them. He followed Cedric at a distance and saw that he was heading toward the Charms corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

“*Diffindo!*”

Cedric’s bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor.

Several bottles of ink smashed.

“Don’t bother,” said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. “Tell Flitwick I’m coming, go on. . .

This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric’s friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

“Hi,” said Cedric, picking up a copy of *A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration* that was now splattered with ink. “My bag just split. . . brand-new and all. . .“

“Cedric,” said Harry, “the first task is dragons.”

“What?” said Cedric, looking up.

“Dragons,” said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flitwick came out to see where Cedric had got to. “They’ve got four, one for each of us, and we’ve got to get past them.”

Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he’d been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric’s gray eyes.

“Are you sure?” Cedric said in a hushed voice.

“Dead sure,” said Harry. “I’ve seen them.”

“But how did you find out? We’re not supposed to know. . . .“

“Never mind,” said Harry quickly - he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. “But I’m not the only one who knows. Fleur and Krum will know by now - Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons too.”

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, and there was a puzzled, almost suspicious look in his eyes.

“Why are you telling me?” he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn’t have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. Harry wouldn’t have let his worst enemy face those monsters unprepared - well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape...

“It’s just . . . fair, isn’t it?” he said to Cedric. “We all know now. . . we’re on an even footing, aren’t we?”

Cedric was still hooking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned around and saw Mad-Eye Moody emerging from a nearby classroom.

“Come with me, Potter,” he growled. “Diggory, off you go.”

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

“Er - Professor, I’m supposed to be in Herbology -“

“Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please...”

Harry followed him, wondering what *was* going to happen to him now. What if

Moody wanted to know how he'd found out about the dragons? Would Moody go to Dumbledore and tell on Hagrid, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, he'd be smaller, much less easy to see from a height of fifty feet..

He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door behind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

"That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter," Moody said quietly.

Harry didn't know what to say; this wasn't the reaction he had expected at all.

"Sit down," said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart's day, the walls had been plastered with beaming, winking pictures of Professor Lockhart himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature he had procured for them to study in class. Now, however, the office was full of a number of exceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been an Auror.

On his desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass spinning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, because he owned one himself, though it was much smaller than Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. What appeared to be a mirror hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it, none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you?" said Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies... no use here, of course, too much interference - students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their homework. Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive, picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I open my trunk."

He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, until Moody's next question brought him sharply back to earth.

"So... found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry hesitated. He'd been afraid of this - but he hadn't told Cedric, and he

certainly wasn't going to tell Moody, that Hagrid had broken the rules.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "It was - a sort of accident that I found out."

Moody grinned. "I wasn't accusing you, laddie. I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won't be. They'll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to prove he's only human."

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

"So... got any ideas how you're going to get past your dragon yet?" said Moody.

"No," said Harry.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favoritism, me. I'm just going to give you some good, general advice. And the first bit is - *play to your strengths.*"

"I haven't got any," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "Excuse me," growled Moody, "you've got strengths if I say you've got them. Think now. What are you best at?"

Harry tried to concentrate. What *was* he best at? Well, that was easy, really --

"Quidditch," he said dully, "and a fat lot of help --"

"That's right," said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. "You're a damn good flier from what I've heard."

"Yeah, but..." Harry stared at him. "I'm not allowed a broom, I've only got my wand..."

"My second piece of general advice," said Moody loudly, interrupting him, "is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to *get what you need.*"

Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

"Come on, boy..." whispered Moody. "Put them together... it's not that difficult..."

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for his Fire-bolt, he needed --

"Hermione," Harry whispered, when he had sped into greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to Professor Sprout as he passed her. "Hermione - I need you to help me."

"What d'you think I've been trying to do, Harry?" she whispered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the quivering Flutterby Bush she was pruning.

"Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow

afternoon.”

And so they practiced. They didn't have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to make various objects fly across the room toward him. He was still having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping like stones to the floor.

“Concentrate, Harry, *concentrate*. . . .“

“What do you think I'm trying to do?” said Harry angrily. “A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason. . . .Okay, try again. . . .“

He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was no point in staying without her. He therefore had to endure over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July were in great danger of sudden, violent deaths.

“Well, that's good,” said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, “just as long as it's not drawn-out. I don't want to suffer.”

Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry's eye for the first time in days, but Harry was still feeling too resentful toward Ron to care. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to make a fly zoom straight into his hand, though he wasn't entirely sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms - perhaps the fly was just stupid.

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Cloak to avoid the teachers. They kept practicing until past midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pretending to think that Harry wanted things thrown at him, started chucking chairs across the room. Harry and Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now mercifully empty.

At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several upturned chairs, an old set of Gobstones, and Neville's toad, Trevor. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

“That's better, Harry, that's loads better,” Hermione said, looking exhausted but very pleased.

“Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell,” Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, “threaten me with a dragon. Right. . . .“ He raised his wand once more. “*Accio Dictionary!*”

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry

caught it.

“Harry, I really think you’ve got it!” said Hermione delightedly.

“Just as long as it works tomorrow,” Harry said. “The Firebolt’s going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it’s going to be in the castle, and I’m going to be out there on the grounds. . . .”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Hermione firmly. “Just as long as you’re concentrating really, really hard on it, it’ll come. Harry, we’d better get some sleep. . . you’re going to need it.”

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had heft him. It returned in full measure, however, on the following morning. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons’ enclosure - though of course, they didn’t yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing “*We’ll have a box of tissues ready, Potter*” as he passed. It was a state of nervousness so advanced that he wondered whether he mightn’t just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon, and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Time was behaving in a more peculiar fashion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch. . . and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall. Lots of people were watching.

“Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. . . . You have to get ready for your first task.”

“Okay,” said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

“Good luck, Harry,” Hermione whispered. “You’ll be fine!”

“Yeah,” said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He heft the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn’t seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Hermione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

“Now, don’t panic,” she said, “just keep a cool head. . . . We’ve got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. . . . The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. . . . Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Harry heard himself say. “Yes, I’m fine.”

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure

would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, *its* entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

“You’re to go in here with the other champions,” said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, “and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there. . . he’ll be telling you the - the procedure. . . . Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a how wooden stool. She didn’t look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

“Harry! Good-o!” said Bagman happily, looking around at *him*. “Come in, come in, make yourself at home!”

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

“Well, now we’re all here – time to fill you in!” said Bagman brightly. “When the audience has assembled, I’m going to be offering each of you this bag” - he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them - “from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different - er - varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too.. . ah, yes... your task is to *collect the golden egg!*”

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman’s words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn’t reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this. .

And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking. . . . Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then - it seemed like about a second later to Harry - Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

“Ladies first,” he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon - a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck. And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a

number three around its neck. He didn't even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now. . . Harry. . . could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er. . . yes," said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry. "I - no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice still further, "you're the underdog here, Harry. . . . Anything I can do to help. . ."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no - I - I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would *know*, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. "I've got a plan worked out, I -"

A whistle had blown somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he walked past, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model.

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed. . . yelled. . . gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric's steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman's commentary made everything much, much worse. . . Horrible pictures formed

in Harry's mind as he heard: "Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow". . . "He's taking risks, this one!". . . "*Clever* move - pity it didn't work!"

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!"

But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she hefted the tent with her head held high and her hand clutching her wand. He and Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other's gaze.

The same process started again. . . "Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh. . . nearly! Careful now. . . good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. . . Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur's marks were being shown. . . more clapping. . . then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear. . . yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away.

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. "That's some nerve he's showing - and - yes, he's got the egg!"

Applause shattered the wintery air like breaking glass; Krum had finished - it would be Harry's turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle blow. He walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the

other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do. . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance.

He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. . . . If it hadn't worked. . . if it wasn't coming. . . He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely. . . .

And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the edge of the woods, soaring into the enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise. . . . Bagman was shouting something. . . but Harry's ears were not working properly anymore. . . listening wasn't important. . . .

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened. . . .

As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks below, and the Horntail shrank to the size of a dog, he realized that he had heft not only the ground behind, but also his fear. . . . He was back where he belonged. . . .

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all. . . just another Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another ugly opposing team.

He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely between the dragon's front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diversionary tactics. . . let's go. . ."

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; a jet of fire had been released exactly where he would have been had he not swerved away. . . but Harry didn't care. . . that was no more than dodging a Bludger.

"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck - if he kept this up, it would be nicely dizzy - but better not push it too long, or it would be breathing fire again -

Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less

lucky - he missed the flames, but the tail came whipping up to meet him instead, and as he swerved to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes --

He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. . . . Now he zoomed around the back of the Horntail, and a possibility occurred to him....

The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them. . . but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them. . . . The trick was to do it carefully, gradually....

He began to fly, first this way, then the other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still posing a sufficient threat to ensure she kept her eyes on him. Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical pupils, her fangs bared...

He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, like a snake before its charmer. . .

Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exasperation. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to swat; her tail thrashed again, but he was too high to reach now. . . . She shot fire into the air, which he dodged. . . . Her jaws opened wide....

"Come on," Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, "come on, come and get me. . . up you get now. . ."

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane - and Harry dived. Before the dragon knew what he had done, or where he had disappeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected by her clawed front legs - he had taken his hands off his Firebolt - he had seized the golden egg -

And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm, and it was as though somebody had just turned the volume back up - for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup -

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody, and Hagrid hurrying to meet him, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even

from this distance. He flew back over the stands, the noise of the crowd pounding his eardrums, and came in smoothly to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. . . . He had got through the first task, he had survived.

“That was excellent, Potter!” cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt - which from her was extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook as she pointed at his shoulder. “You’ll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. . . . Over there, she’s had to mop up Diggory already. . . .”

“Yeh did it, Harry!” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Yeh did it! An’ agains’ the Horntail an’ all, an’ yeh know Charlie said that was the wors’ – “

“Thanks, Hagrid,” said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn’t blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

“Nice and easy does the trick, Potter,” he growled.

“Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please. . . “ said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, looking worried.

“Dragons!” she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric’s shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn’t seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry’s shoulder, talking furiously all the while. “Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You’re very lucky. . . this is quite shallow. . . it’ll need cleaning before I heal it up, though... “

She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her wand, and he felt it heal instantly.

“Now, just sit quietly for a minute - *sit!* And then you can go and get your score.”

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, “How does it feel now, Diggory?”

Harry didn’t want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he’d reached the mouth of the tent, two people had come darting inside - Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

“Harry, you were brilliant!” Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. “You were amazing! You really were!”

But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

“Harry,” he said, very seriously, “whoever put your name in that goblet - I - I reckon they’re trying to do you in!”

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened - as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he'd been made champion.

"Caught on, have you?" said Harry coldly. "Took you long enough."

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry knew Ron was about to apologize and suddenly he found he didn't need to hear it.

"It's okay," he said, before Ron could get the words out. "Forget it."

"No," said Ron, "I shouldn't've -"

"Forget it," Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back.

Hermione burst into tears.

"There's nothing to cry about!" Harry told her, bewildered.

"You two are so *stupid!*" she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before either of them could stop her, she had given both of them a hug and dashed away, now positively howling.

"Barking mad," said Ron, shaking his head. "Harry, c'mon, they'll be putting up your scores. . . ."

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Ron by his side, talking fast.

"You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground. . . turned it into a dog. . . he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well - the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance - well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire - she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum - you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs - they took marks off for that, he wasn't supposed to do any damage to them."

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the enclosure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, Harry could see where the five judges were sitting - right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Ron said, and Harry squinting up the field, saw the first judge - Madame Maxime - raise her wand in the air. What looked like a

long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

“Not bad!” said Ron as the crowd applauded. “I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. . .

Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

“Looking good!” Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Next, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheering harder than ever.

Ludo Bagman - *ten*.

“Ten?” said Harry in disbelief. “But. . . I got hurt. . . . What’s he playing at?”

“Harry, don’t complain!” Ron yelled excitedly.

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, and then a number shot out of his wand too - four.

“*What?*” Ron bellowed furiously. “*Four?* You lousy, biased scum-bag, you gave Krum ten!”

But Harry didn’t care, he wouldn’t have cared if Karkaroff had given him zero; Ron’s indignation on his behalf was worth about a hundred points to him. He didn’t tell Ron this, of course, but his heart felt lighter than air as he turned to leave the enclosure. And it wasn’t just Ron. . . those weren’t only Gryffindors cheering in the crowd. When it had come to it, when they had seen what he was facing, most of the school had been on his side as well as Cedric’s. . . . He didn’t care about the Slytherins, he could stand whatever they threw at him now.

“You’re tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!” said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward the school. “Listen, I’ve got to run, I’ve got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I’d tell her what happened - but that was unbelievable! Oh yeah - and they told me to tell you you’ve got to hang around for a few more minutes. . . . Bagman wants a word, back in the champions’ tent.”

Ron said he would wait, so Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he’d felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he’d walked out to face it.... There was no comparison; the wait had been immeasurably worse.

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric’s face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him.

“Good one, Harry.”

“And you,” said Harry, grinning back.

“Well done, all of you!” said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. “Now, just a quick few words. You’ve got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half

past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth - but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open. . . see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg - because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

Harry left the tent, rejoined Ron, and they started to walk back around the edge of the forest, talking hard; Harry wanted to hear what the other champions had done in more detail. Then, as they rounded the clump of trees behind which Harry had first heard the dragons roar, a witch leapt out from behind them.

It was Rita Skeeter. She was wearing acid-green robes today; the Quick-Quotes Quill in her hand blended perfectly against them.

"Congratulations, Harry!" she said, beaming at him. "I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel *now*, about the fairness of the scoring?"

"Yeah, you can have a word," said Harry savagely. "*Good-bye.*"

And he set off back to the castle with Ron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – THE HOUSE-ELF LIBERATION FRONT

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter telling him that he had managed to get past his dragon unscathed. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater, by the time they entered the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

"Fits, doesn't it?" he said. "Remember what Malfoy said on the train, about his dad being friends with Karkaroff? Now we know where they knew each other. They were probably running around in masks together at the World Cup.... I'll tell you one thing, though, Harry, if it *was* Karkaroff who put your name in the goblet, he's going to be feeling really stupid now, isn't he? Didn't work, did it? You only got a scratch! Come here - I'll do it -"

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry's head, hooting incessantly. Ron snatched Pigwidgeon out of the air and held him still while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

"There's no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dangerous, how could they be?" Ron went on as he carried Pigwidgeon to the window. "You know what? I reckon you could win this tournament, Harry, I'm serious."

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his behavior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. Hermione, however, leaned against the Owlery wall, folded her arms, and frowned at Ron.

“Harry’s got a long way to go before he finishes this tournament,” she said seriously. “If that was the first task, I hate to think what’s coming next.”

“Right little ray of sunshine, aren’t you?” said Ron. “You and Professor Trelawney should get together sometime.”

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plummeted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up again; the letter attached to his leg was much longer and heavier than usual - Harry hadn’t been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled, and dodged the Horntail. They watched Pigwidgeon disappear into the darkness, and then Ron said, “Well, we’d better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry - Fred and George should have nicked enough food from the kitchens by now.”

Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster’s Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail’s head on his Firebolt, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

Harry helped himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione. He couldn’t believe how happy he felt; he had Ron back on his side, he’d gotten through the first task, and he wouldn’t have to face the second one for three months.

“Blimey, this is heavy,” said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. “Open it, Harry, go on! Let’s just see what’s inside it!”

“He’s supposed to work out the clue on his own,” Hermione said swiftly. “It’s in the tournament rules. . . .”

“I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too,” Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

“Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!” several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open.

It was hollow and completely empty - but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick’s deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

“Shut it!” Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

“What was that?” said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it

shut again. "Sounded like a banshee ... Maybe you've got to get past one of those next, Harry!"

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus Curse!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing ... maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower. Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch -"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred laughed.

"Just my little joke, Neville... ."

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, "Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?"

"Yep," said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak and imitated a house-elf. "Anything we can get you, sir, anything at all! They're dead helpful... get me a roast ox if I said I was peckish."

"How do you get in there?" Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

"Easy," said Fred, "concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and -" He stopped and looked suspiciously at her. "Why?"

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly.

"Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?" said George. "Going to give up all the leaflet stuff and try and stir them up into rebellion?"

Several people chortled. Hermione didn't answer.

"Don't you go upsetting them and telling them they've got to take clothes and salaries!" said Fred warningly. "You'll put them off their cooking!"

Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

"Oh - sorry, Neville!" Fred shouted over all the laughter. "I forgot - it *was* the custard creams we hexed -"

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal. He even joined in laughing.

"Canary Creams!" Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. "George and I invented them - seven Sickles each, a bargain!"

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. Before he pulled the curtains of his four-poster shut. Harry set his tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. *Really*, Harry thought, as he pulled the hangings on his four-poster closed, *Hagrid had a point... they were all right, really, dragons... .*

The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter. Harry was glad of its fires and thick walls every time he passed the Durmstrang ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing against the dark skies. He thought the Beauxbatons caravan was likely to be pretty chilly too. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime's horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whiskey; the fumes wafting from the trough in the corner of their paddock was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were still tending the horrible skrewts and needed their wits about them.

"I'm not sure whether they hibernate or not," Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson. "Thought we'd jus' try an see if they fancied a kip . . . we'll jus' settle 'em down in these boxes. . . ."

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. Each of them was now approaching six feet in length. Their thick gray armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make the skrewts the most repulsive things Harry had ever seen. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

"We'll jus' lead 'em in here," Hagrid said, "an' put the lids on, and we'll see what happens."

But the skrewts, it transpired, did *not* hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed in. Hagrid was soon yelling, "Don panic, now, don' panic!" while the skrewts rampaged around the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Most of the class - Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in the lead - had fled into Hagrid's cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were among those who remained outside trying to help Hagrid. Together they managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left.

"Don' frighten him, now!" Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt, which was advancing menacingly on them, its sting arched, quivering, over its back. "Jus' try an slip the rope 'round his sting, so he won hurt any o' the others!"

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that!" Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid's cabin, still holding the skrewt off with their sparks.

"Well, well, well. . . this *does* look like fun."

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid's garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire shot out of its end, withering the pumpkin plants nearby.

"Who're you?" Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt's sting and tightened it.

"Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet* reporter," Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold

teeth glinted.

"Thought Dumbledore said you weren't allowed inside the school anymore," said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got off the slightly squashed skrewt and started tugging it over to its fellows.

Rita acted as though she hadn't heard what Hagrid had said.

"What are these fascinating creatures called?" she asked, beaming still more widely.

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," grunted Hagrid.

"Really?" said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. "I've never heard of them before... where do they come from?"

Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid's wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where *had* Hagrid got the skrewts from? Hermione, who seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly, "They're very interesting, aren't they? Aren't they, Harry?"

"What? Oh yeah . . . ouch . . . interesting," said Harry as she stepped on his foot.

"Ah, *you're* here, Harry!" said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. "So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One of your favorite lessons?"

"Yes," said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

"Lovely," said Rita. "Really lovely. Been teaching long?" she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek), Lavender (whose robes were badly singed), Seamus (who was nursing several burnt fingers), and then to the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was clear.

"This is o'ny me second year," said Hagrid.

"Lovely... I don't suppose you'd like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures? The *Prophet does* a zoological column every Wednesday, as I'm sure you know. We could feature these - er - Bang-Ended Scoots."

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid said eagerly. "Er - yeah, why not?"

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing, so he had to stand and watch in silence as Hagrid and Rita Skeeter made arrangements to meet in the Three Broomsticks for a good long interview later that week. Then the bell rang up at the castle, signaling the end of the lesson.

"Well, good-bye, Harry!" Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. "Until Friday night, then, Hagrid!"

"She'll twist everything he says," Harry said under his breath.

"Just as long as he didn't import those skrewts illegally or anything," said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another - it was exactly the sort of thing Hagrid might do.

"Hagrids been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledores never sacked him," said Ron consolingly. "Worst that can happen is Hagrid'll have to get rid of the skrewts. Sorry . . . did I say worst? I meant best."

Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheerful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing

star charts and predictions, but now that he and Ron were friends once more, the whole thing seemed very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting their own horrific deaths, quickly became irritated as they sniggered through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

"I would *think*," she said, in a mystical whisper that did not conceal her obvious annoyance, "that *some* of us" - she stared very meaningfully at Harry- "might be a little less *frivolous* had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the urge to consult the orb overpowered me. I arose, I settled myself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths . . . and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?"

"An ugly old bat in outsize specs?" Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

"*Death*, my dears."

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, "it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever lower. . . ever lower over the castle. . . ."

She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

"It'd be a bit more impressive if she hadn't done it about eighty times before," Harry said as they finally regained the fresh air of the staircase beneath Professor Trelawney's room. "But if I'd dropped dead every time she's told me I'm going to, I'd be a medical miracle."

"You'd be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost," said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction, his wide eyes staring sinisterly. "At least we didn't get homework. I hope Hermione got loads *off* Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. . . ."

But Hermione wasn't at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person in there was Viktor Krum. Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph - but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

"Wonder where she's got to?" Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Dunno . . . balderdash."

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione's arrival.

"Harry!" she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). "Harry, you've got to come - you've *got* to come, the most amazing thing's happened- please -"

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

"What's the matter?" Harry said.

"I'll show you when we get there - oh come on, quick -"

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

"Okay," Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

"Oh don't mind me!" the Fat Lady called irritably after them. "Don't apologize for bothering me! I'll just hang here, wide open, until you get back, shall I?"

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron shouted over his shoulder.

"Hermione, where are we going?" Harry asked, after she had led them down through six floors, and started down the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

"You'll see, you'll see in a minute!" said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone the night after the Goblet of Fire had regurgitated his and Harry's names. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but instead of ending up in a gloomy underground passage like the one that led to Snape's dungeon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with cheerful paintings that were mainly of food.

"Oh hang on . . ." said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. "Wait a minute, Hermione. . . ."

"What?" She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her face.

"I know what this is about," said Harry.

He nudged Ron and pointed to the painting just behind Hermione. It showed a gigantic silver fruit bowl.

"Hermione!" said Ron, cottoning on. "You're trying to rope us into that spew stuff again!"

"No, no, I'm not!" she said hastily. "And it's not *spew*, Ron -"

"Changed the name, have you?" said Ron, frowning at her. "What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I'm not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I'm not doing it -"

"I'm not asking you to!" Hermione said impatiently. "I came down here just now, to talk to them all, and I found - oh come *on*, Harry, I want to show you!"

She seized his arm again, pulled him in front of the picture of the giant fruit bowl, stretched out her forefinger, and tickled the huge green pear. It began to squirm, chuckling, and suddenly turned into a large green door handle. Hermione seized it, pulled the door open, and pushed Harry hard in the back, forcing him inside.

He had one brief glimpse of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, large as the Great Hall above it, with mounds of glittering brass pots and pans heaped around the stone walls, and a great brick fireplace at the other end, when something small hurtled toward him from the middle of the room, squealing, "Harry Potter, sir! *Harry Potter!*"

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as the squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff, hugging him so tightly he thought his ribs would break.

"D-Dobby?" Harry gasped.

"It *is* Dobby, sir, it is!" squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel.

"Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!"

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of happiness. He looked almost exactly as Harry remembered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the batlike ears, the long fingers and feet - all except the clothes, which were very different.

When Dobby had worked for the Malfoys, he had always worn the same filthy old pillowcase. Now, however, he was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cozy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children's soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr. Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what're you doing here?" Harry said in amazement. "Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!" Dobby squealed excitedly. "Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, and he seized Harry's hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them, was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall. At the moment, they were clear of food, dinner having finished, but he supposed that an hour ago they had been laden with dishes that were then sent up through the ceiling to their counterparts above.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed.

"Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky was plainly not taking care of other clothes at all. There were soup stains all down her blouse and a burn in her skirt.

"Hello, Winky," said Harry.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilled out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. She and Ron had followed Harry and Dobby to the end of the kitchen. "Winky, don't cry, please don't..."

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over Winky's sobs.

"Er - yeah, okay," said Harry.

Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

"Good service!" Ron said, in an impressed voice. Hermione frowned at him, but the elves all looked delighted; they bowed very low and retreated.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked as Dobby handed around the tea.

"Only a week. Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very difficult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed -"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow.

"Dobby has traveled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid. Harry Potter.... Dobby likes being free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite increase in the volume other crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay face-down on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea. Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! *Hogwarts!* So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better."

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying *you*, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she was glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"

"Ashamed?" said Hermione blankly. "But - Winky, come on! It's Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You didn't do anything wrong, he was really horrible to you -"

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn't hear a word, and screeched, "You is not insulting my master, miss! You is not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!"

"Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter," squeaked Dobby confidentially. "Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won't do it."

"Can't house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, sir, no," said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. "'Tis part of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family's honor, and we never speaks ill of them - though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said we is free to - to-"

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward. Dobby whispered, "He said we is free to call him a - a barmy old codger if we likes, sir!"

Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle.

"But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter," he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. "Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much, sir, and is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him."

"But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?" Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby's immense eyes.

"Dobby - Dobby could," he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. "Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his old masters were - were - *bad Dark wizards*!"

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring - then he rushed over to the nearest table and began banging his head on it very hard, squealing, "*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*"

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

"Thank you. Harry Potter, thank you," said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

"You just need a bit of practice," Harry said.

"Practice!" squealed Winky furiously. "You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your masters!"

"They isn't my masters anymore, Winky!" said Dobby defiantly. "Dobby doesn't care what they think anymore!"

"Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!" moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. "My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her ... oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

"Winky," said Hermione firmly, "I'm quite sure Mr. Crouch is getting along perfectly well without you. We've seen him, you know -"

"You is seeing my master?" said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling at Hermione. "You is seeing him here at

Hogwarts?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Triwizard Tournament."

"Mr. Bagman comes too?" squeaked Winky, and to Harry's great surprise (and Ron's and Hermione's too, by the looks on their faces), she looked angry again. "Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! A very bad wizard! My master isn't liking him, oh no, not at all!"

"Bagman - bad?" said Harry.

"Oh yes," Winky said, nodding her head furiously, "My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying... Winky - Winky keeps her master's secrets. ..."

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, "Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help him no more!"

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby chatted happily about his life as a free elf and his plans for his wages.

"Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!" he said happily, pointing at his bare chest,

"Tell you what, Dobby," said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, "I'll give you the one my mum knits me this Christmas, I always get one from her. You don't mind maroon, do you?"

Dobby was delighted.

"We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you," Ron told him, "but it'll go well with your tea cozy."

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back upstairs. Hermione refused, with a pained look at the way the elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

"Thanks a lot!" Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. "See you, Dobby!"

"Harry Potter . . . can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?" Dobby asked tentatively.

"'Course you can," said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

"You know what?" said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps into the entrance hall again. "All these years I've been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens - well, it's not exactly difficult, is it? They can't wait to give it away!"

"I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know," said Hermione, leading the way back up the marble staircase. "Dobby coming to work here, I mean. The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!"

"Let's hope they don't look too closely at Winky," said Harry.

"Oh she'll cheer up," said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful. "Once the shock's worn off, and she's got used to Hogwarts, she'll see how much better off she is without that Crouch man."

"She seems to love him," said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

"Doesn't think much of Bagman, though, does she?" said Harry. "Wonder what

Crouch says at home about him?"

"Probably says he's not a very good Head of Department," said Hermione, "and let's face it... he's got a point, hasn't he?"

"I'd still rather work for him than old Crouch," said Ron. "At least Bagman's got a sense of humor."

"Don't let Percy hear you saying that," Hermione said, smiling slightly.

"Yeah, well, Percy wouldn't want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?" said Ron, now starting on a chocolate éclair. "Percy wouldn't recognize a joke if it danced naked in front of him wearing Dobby's tea cozy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – THE UNEXPECTED TASK

Potter! Weasley! *Will you pay attention?*"

Professor McGonagall's irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron both jumped and looked up.

It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been shut away in a large cage on Professor McGonagall's desk (Neville's still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard (*"Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transforming Spells must be adapted when performing Cross-Species Switches"*). The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a sword fight with a couple of Fred and George's fake wands at the back of the class, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

"Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age," said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look at the pair of them as the head of Harry's haddock drooped and fell silently to the floor - Ron's parrot's beak had severed it moments before - "I have something to say to you all.

"The Yule Ball is approaching - a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above - although you may invite a younger student if you wish -"

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too fought not to giggle. They both looked around at Harry, Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

"Dress robes will be worn," Professor McGonagall continued, "and the ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then -"

Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to - er - let our hair down," she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see what was funny this time: Professor McGonagall, with her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on, "that we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most

seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as everyone packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders.

Professor McGonagall called above the noise, "Potter - a word, if you please."

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher's desk. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, and then said, "Potter, the champions and their partners -"

"What partners?" said Harry.

Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

"Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter," she said coldly. "*Your dance partners.*"

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

"Dance partners?" He felt himself going red. "I don't dance," he said quickly.

"Oh yes, you do," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners open the ball."

Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon's work parties.

"I'm not dancing," he said.

"It is traditional," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

"But-I don't-"

"You heard me, Potter," said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago. Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. But now that he had done the latter, and was facing the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he'd rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, because the alternative was usually going back to Privet Drive, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year and above seemed to be staying, and they all seemed to Harry to be obsessed with the coming ball - or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to hold; he had never quite noticed that before. Girls giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear on Christmas night... .

"Why do they have to move in packs?" Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at Harry. "How're you supposed to get one on their own to ask them?"

"Lasso one?" Ron suggested. "Got any idea who you're going to try?"

Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd *like* to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. . . . Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

"Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a champion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be queuing up to go with you."

In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover, to Harry's amazement, he turned out to be quite right.

A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said no before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's, and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second year and (to his horror) a fifth year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

"She was quite good-looking," said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

"She was a foot taller than me," said Harry, still unnerved. "Imagine what I'd look like trying to dance with her."

Hermione's words about Krum kept coming back to him. "They only like him because he's famous!" Harry doubted very much if any of the girls who had asked to be his partner so far would have wanted to go to the ball with him if he hadn't been a school champion. Then he wondered if this would bother him if Cho asked him.

On the whole, Harry had to admit that even with the embarrassing prospect of opening the ball before him, life had definitely improved since he had got through the first task. He wasn't attracting nearly as much unpleasantness in the corridors anymore, which he suspected had a lot to do with Cedric - he had an idea Cedric might have told the Hufflepuffs to leave Harry alone, in gratitude for Harry's tip-off about the dragons. There seemed to be fewer *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges around too. Draco Malfoy, of course, was still quoting Rita Skeeter's article to him at every possible opportunity, but he was getting fewer and fewer laughs out of it - and just to heighten Harry's feeling of well-being, no story about Hagrid had appeared in the *Daily Prophet*.

"She didn't seem very int'rested in magical creatures, ter tell yeh the truth," Hagrid said, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione asked him how his interview with Rita Skeeter had gone during the last Care of Magical Creatures lesson of the term. To their very great relief, Hagrid had given up on direct contact with the skrewts now, and they were merely sheltering behind his cabin today, sitting at a trestle table and preparing a fresh selection of food with which to tempt the skrewts.

"She jus' wanted me ter talk about you, Harry," Hagrid continued in a low voice. "Well, I told her we'd been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. 'Never had to tell him off in four years?' she said. 'Never played you up in lessons, has he?' I told her no, an she didn't seem happy at all. Yeh'd think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry."

"'Course she did," said Harry, throwing lumps of dragon liver into a large metal bowl and picking up his knife to cut some more. "She can't keep writing about what a tragic little hero I am, it'll get boring."

"She wants a new angle, Hagrid," said Ron wisely as he shelled salamander eggs. "You were supposed to say Harry's a mad delinquent!"

"But he's not!" said Hagrid, looking genuinely shocked.

"She should've interviewed Snape," said Harry grimly. "He'd give her the goods

on me any day. *'Potter has been crossing lines ever since he first arrived at this school. . . .'*

"Said that, did he?" said Hagrid, while Ron and Hermione laughed. "Well, yeh might've bent a few rules. Harry, bu' yeh're all righ' really, aren' you?"

"Cheers, Hagrid," said Harry, grinning.

"You coming to this ball thing on Christmas Day, Hagrid?" said Ron.

"Though' I might look in on it, yeah," said Hagrid gruffly. "Should be a good do, I reckon. You'll be openin the dancin', won yeh, Harry? Who're you takin'?"

"No one, yet," said Harry, feeling himself going red again. Hagrid didn't pursue the subject.

The last week of term became increasingly boisterous as it progressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn't believe half of them - for instance, that Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn't know, never having had access to a wizard's wireless, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizards Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like little Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm

Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions - as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound as boring as Percys cauldron-bottom report. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

"Evil, he is," Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor common room.

"Springing a test on us on the last day. Ruining the last bit of term with a whole load of studying."

"Mmm . . . you're not exactly straining yourself, though, are you?" said Hermione, looking at him over the top of her Potions notes. Ron was busy building a card castle out of his Exploding Snap pack - a much more interesting pastime than with Muggle cards, because of the chance that the whole thing would blow up at any second.

"It's Christmas, Hermione," said Harry lazily; he was rereading *Flying with the Cannons* for the tenth time in an armchair near the fire.

Hermione looked severely over at him too. "I'd have thought you'd be doing something constructive, Harry, even if you don't want to learn your antidotes!"

"Like what?" Harry said as he watched Joey Jenkins of the Cannons belt a Bludger toward a Ballycastle Bats Chaser.

"That egg!" Hermione hissed.

"Come on, Hermione, I've got till February the twenty-fourth," Harry said.

He had put the golden egg upstairs in his trunk and hadn't opened it since the celebration party after the first task. There were still two and a half months to go until he needed to know what all the screechy wailing meant, after all.

"But it might take weeks to work it out!" said Hermione. "You're going to look a real idiot if everyone else knows what the next task is and you don't!"

"Leave him alone, Hermione, he's earned a bit of a break," said Ron, and he placed the last two cards on top of the castle and the whole lot blew up, singeing his eyebrows.

"Nice look, Ron ... go well with your dress robes, that will."

It was Fred and George. They sat down at the table with Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Ron felt how much damage had been done.

"Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?" George asked.

"No, he's off delivering a letter," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because George wants to invite him to the ball," said Fred sarcastically.

"Because *we* want to send a letter, you stupid great prat," said George.

"Who d'you two keep writing to, eh?" said Ron.

"Nose out, Ron, or I'll burn that for you too," said Fred, waving his wand threateningly. "So . . . you lot got dates for the ball yet?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"Well, you'd better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone," said Fred.

"Who're you going with, then?" said Ron.

"Angelina," said Fred promptly, without a trace of embarrassment.

"What?" said Ron, taken aback. "You've already asked her?"

"Good point," said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, "Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

"What?" she called back.

"Want to come to the ball with me?"

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

"All right, then," she said, and she turned back to Alicia and carried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

"There you go," said Fred to Harry and Ron, "piece of cake."

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, "We'd better use a school owl then, George, come on. . . ."

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

"We *should* get a move on, you know . . . ask someone. He's right. We don't want to end up with a pair of trolls."

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

"A pair of... *what*, excuse me?"

"Well - you know," said Ron, shrugging. "I'd rather go alone than with - with Eloise Midgen, say."

"Her acne's loads better lately - and she's really nice!"

"Her nose is off-center," said Ron.

"Oh I see," Hermione said, bristling. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?"

"Er - yeah, that sounds about right," said Ron.

"I'm going to bed," Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls' staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the decorations went up, Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear "O Come, All Ye Faithful" sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

And still, Harry hadn't asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out, Ron would look much less stupid than he would without a partner;

Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

"I suppose there's always Moaning Myrtle," he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls' toilets on the second floor.

"Harry - we've just got to grit our teeth and do it," said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were planning the storming of an impregnable fortress. "When we get back to the common room tonight, we'll both have partners - agreed?"

"Er . . . okay," said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day - during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic - she was surrounded by friends. Didn't she *ever* go anywhere alone? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no - she even seemed to go there with an escort of four or five girls. Yet if he didn't do it soon, she was bound to have been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape's Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient - a bezoar - meaning that he received bottom marks. He didn't care, though; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and hurried to the dungeon door.

"I'll meet you at dinner," he said to Ron and Hermione, and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. ... He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for her, and (rather sooner than he had expected) he found her, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"Er - Cho? Could I have a word with you?"

Giggling should be made illegal. Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn't, though. She said, "Okay," and followed him out of earshot of other classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had

missed a step going downstairs.

"Er," he said.

He couldn't ask her. He couldn't. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him. The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

"Wangoballwime?"

"Sorry?" said Cho.

"D'you - d'you want to go to the ball with me?" said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? *Why?*

"Oh!" said Cho, and she went red too. "Oh Harry, I'm really sorry," and she truly looked it. "I've already said I'll go with someone else."

"Oh," said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn't seem to have any insides at all.

"Oh okay," he said, "no problem."

"I'm really sorry," she said again.

"That's okay," said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, "Well-"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well, 'bye," said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

"Who're you going with?"

"Oh - Cedric," she said. "Cedric Diggory."

"Oh right," said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho's voice echoing in his ears with every step he took. "*Cedric - Cedric Diggory.*" He had been starting to quite like Cedric - prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome, and popular, and nearly everyone's favorite champion. Now he suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn't have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

"Fairy lights," he said dully to the Fat Lady - the password had been changed the previous day.

"Yes, indeed, dear!" she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. Ginny was sitting with him, talking to him in what seemed to be a low, soothing voice.

"What's up, Ron?" said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

"Why did I do it?" he said wildly. "I don't know what made me do it!"

"What?" said Harry.

"He - er - just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him," said Ginny. She looked as though she was fighting back a smile, but she kept patting Ron's arm sympathetically.

"You *what?*' said Harry.

"I don't know what made me do it!" Ron gasped again. "What was I playing at? There were people - all around - I've gone mad - everyone watching! I was just walking past her in the entrance hall - she was standing there talking to Diggory - and it sort of came over me - and I asked her!"

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

"She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn't even answer. And then - I dunno - I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it."

"She's part veela," said Harry. "You were right - her grandmother was one. It wasn't your fault, I bet you just walked past when she was turning on the old charm for Diggory and got a blast of it - but she was wasting her time. He's going with Cho Chang."

Ron looked up.

"I asked her to go with me just now," Harry said dully, "and she told me."

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

"This is mad," said Ron. "We're the only ones left who haven't got anyone - well, except Neville. Hey - guess who he asked? *Hermione!*"

"*What?*" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions! Said she's always been really nice, helping him out with work and stuff- but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville ... I mean, who would?"

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh -"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because - oh shut up laughing, you two - because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" said Ginny.

That shut Harry and Ron up.

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she? Well, I'm sure you'll find someone *somewhere* who'll have you."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, Neville's right - you *are* a girl. . . ."

"Oh well spotted," she said acidly.

"Well - you can come with one of us!"

"No, I can't," snapped Hermione.

"Oh come on," he said impatiently, "we need partners, we're going to look really stupid if we haven't got any, everyone else has . . ."

"I can't come with you," said Hermione, now blushing, "because I'm already going with someone."

"No, you're not!" said Ron. "You just said that to get rid of Neville!"

"Oh *did* I?" said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Just because it's taken *you* three years to notice, Ron, doesn't mean no one *else* has spotted I'm a girl!"

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

"Okay, okay, we know you're a girl," he said. "That do? Will you come now?"

"I've already told you!" Hermione said very angrily. "I'm going with someone else!"

And she stormed off toward the girls' dormitories again.

"She's lying," said Ron flatly, watching her go.

"She's not," said Ginny quietly.

"Who is it then?" said Ron sharply.

"I'm not telling you, it's her business," said Ginny.

"Right," said Ron, who looked extremely put out, "this is getting stupid. Ginny, *you* can go with Harry, and I'll just -"

"I can't," said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. "I'm going with - with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I thought. . . well. . . I'm not going to be able to go otherwise, I'm not in fourth year." She looked extremely miserable. "I think I'll go and have dinner," she said, and she got up and walked off to the portrait hole, her head bowed.

Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender - will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lowering his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

"Ooooh - *who*?" she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. "No idea," he said. "So what about Ron?"

"Well. . ." said Parvati slowly, "I suppose my sister might. . . Padma, you know ... in Ravenclaw. I'll ask her if you like."

"Yeah, that would be great," said Harry. "Let me know, will you?"

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much that Padma Patil's nose was dead center.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – THE YULE BALL

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays. Harry was in no mood to work when term ended, and spent the week

leading up to Christmas enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than during term-time; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Creams, and for the first couple of days of the holidays, people kept bursting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else offered them with extreme caution, in case it had a Canary Cream concealed in the center, and George confided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing something else. Harry made a mental note never to accept so much as a crisp from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening (Ron skulking behind Harry, keen not to be spotted by Fleur). "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't she?"

"Hermione - who are you going to the ball with?" said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. However, Hermione merely frowned and said, "I'm not telling you, you'll just make fun of me."

"You're joking, Weasley!" said Malfoy, behind them. "You're not telling me someone's asked *that* to the ball? Not the long-molared Mudblood?"

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoys shoulder, "Hello, Professor Moody!"

Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his stew.

"Twitchy little ferret, aren't you, Malfoy?" said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase laughing heartily.

"Hermione," said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frowning, "your teeth ..."

"What about them?" she said.

"Well, they're different. . . I've just noticed. . . ."

"Of course they are - did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?"

"No, I mean, they're different to how they were before he put that hex on you. . . . They're all... straight and - and normal-sized."

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he remembered.

"Well. . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were," she said. "And I just. . . let her carry on a bit." She smiled even more widely. "Mum and

Dad won't be too pleased. I've been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they're dentists, they just don't think teeth and magic should - look! Pigwidgeons back!"

Ron's tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People passing him were pointing and laughing, and a group of third-year girls paused and said, "Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn't he *cute*?"

Stupid little feathery git!" Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. "You bring letters to the addressee! You don't hang around showing off!"

Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron's fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

"Clear off!" Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared through the air. "Here - take it, Harry," Ron added in an undertone as the third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sirius's reply off Pigwidgeon's leg. Harry pocketed it, and they hurried back to Gryffindor Tower to read it.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was up to. Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat apart from everyone else by a dark window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitis Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point - "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered - but your way was better, I'm impressed.

Don't get complacent, though. Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open - particularly when the person we discussed is around and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble.

Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

"He sounds exactly like Moody," said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. "Constant vigilance!" You'd think I walk around with my eyes shut, banging off the walls. ..."

"But he's right, Harry," said Hermione, "you *have* still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, you know, and start working out what it means. . . ."

"Hermione, he's got ages!" snapped Ron. "Want a game of chess, Harry?"

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione's face, he said, "Come on, how'm I supposed to concentrate with all this noise going on? I won't even be able to hear the egg over this lot."

"Oh I suppose not," she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate of Ron's, involving a couple of recklessly

brave pawns and a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and saw something with very large, round, green eyes staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

"*Dobby!*" Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. "Don't *do* that!"

"Dobby is sorry, sir!" squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping backward with his long fingers over his mouth. "Dobby is only wanting to wish Harry Potter 'Merry Christmas' and bring him a present, Sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him sometimes, sir!"

"It's okay," said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. "Just - just prod me or something in future, all right, don't bend over me like that. ..."

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his bedside table, and put them on. His yell had awoken Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. All of them were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

"Someone attacking you, Harry?" Seamus asked sleepily.

"No, it's just Dobby," Harry muttered. "Go back to sleep."

"Nah . . . presents!" said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that now they were awake they might as well get down to some present-opening too. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harry's bed, still looking worried that he had upset Harry. There was a Christmas bauble tied to the loop on top of his tea cozy.

"Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?" he squeaked tentatively.

"Course you can," said Harry. "Er. . . I've got something for you too."

It was a lie; he hadn't bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly knobbly rolled-up pair of socks. They were his oldest and foulest, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had been using them to cushion his Sneakoscope for over a year now. He pulled out the Sneako-scope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to wrap them. . ."

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

"Socks are Dobby's favorite, favorite clothes, sir!" he said, ripping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon's. "I has seven now, sir. . . . But sir ..." he said, his eyes widening, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, "they has made a mistake in the shop, Harry Potter, they is giving you two the same!"

"Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn't spot that?" said Ron, grinning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with wrapping paper. "Tell you what, Dobby - here you go - take these two, and you can mix them up properly. And here's your sweater."

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent, Dobby looked quite overwhelmed.

"Sir is very kind!" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. "Dobby knew sir must be a great wizard, for he is Harry Potter's greatest

friend, but Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless
-"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Wow, Harry -" He had just opened Harry's present, a Chudley Cannon hat. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be - socks.

"Dobby is making them himself, sir!" the elf said happily. "He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!"

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitches.

"They're . . . they're really . . . well, thanks, Dobby," said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby's eyes to leak with happiness again.

"Dobby must go now, sir, we is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!" said Dobby, and he hurried out of the dormitory, waving good-bye to Ron and the others as he passed.

Harry's other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby's odd socks - with the obvious exception of the Dursleys', which consisted of a single tissue, an all-time low - Harry supposed they too were remembering the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*; Ron, a bulging bag of Dungbombs; Sirius, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all Harry's favorites: Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley's usual package, including a new sweater (green, with a picture of a dragon on it - Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent most of the morning in Gryffindor Tower, where everyone was enjoying their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas puddings, and large piles of Cribbage's Wizarding Crackers.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going back upstairs to get ready for the ball.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incredulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when a large snowball, thrown by George, hit him hard on the side of the head. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps into the castle.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, the others abandoned their snowball fight and trooped back to the common room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them extremely tipsy, empty boxes of chocolate liqueurs littering the bottom other picture.

"Lairy fights, that's the one!" she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very self-conscious, but none as much as Ron, who surveyed himself in the long mirror in the corner with an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else. In a desperate attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least he was now lace-free, although he hadn't done a very neat job, and the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

"I still can't work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year," muttered Dean.

"Animal magnetism," said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists. Harry was relieved to see that she wasn't giggling.

"You - er - look nice," he said awkwardly.

"Thanks," she said. "Padma's going to meet you in the entrance hall," she added to Ron.

"Right," said Ron, looking around. "Where's Hermione?"

Parvati shrugged. "Shall we go down then, Harry?"

"Okay," said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way out of the portrait hole.

The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma, and led her over to Harry and Ron.

"Hi," said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn't look too enthusiastic about having Ron as a partner, though; her dark eyes lingered on the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

"Hi," said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. "Oh no ..."

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver-gray satin, and accompanied by the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

"Where *is* Hermione?" he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes of black velvet with a high collar, which in Harry's opinion made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy's arm. Crabbe and Goyle were both wearing green; they resembled moss-colored boulders, and neither of them, Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Krum was at the front of the party, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue robes Harry didn't know. Over their heads he saw

that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights - meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the statues of what seemed to be Father Christmas and his reindeer.

Then Professor McGonagall's voice called, "Champions over here, please!" Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said, "See you in a minute" to Ron and Padma and walked forward, the chattering crowd parting to let them through. Professor McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the brim of her hat, told them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stationed themselves nearest the doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho were close to Harry too; he looked away from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped. It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow - or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling - rather nervously, it was true - but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever; Harry couldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

"Hi, Harry!" she said. "Hi, Parvati!"

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, Krum's fan club from the library stalked past, throwing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he didn't seem to be able to find an insult to throw at her. Ron, however, walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everybody, steering Harry so forcefully that he felt as though he were a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron was watching Hermione pass with narrowed eyes. Padma was looking sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkably like Ron's as he watched Krum and Hermione draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had

changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not there. The fifth seat at the table was occupied by Percy Weasley.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring pointedly at Harry. Harry took the hint and sat down next to Percy, who was wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smugness that Harry thought it ought to be fined.

"I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner.

"I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising - overwork. He's not as young as he was - though still quite brilliant, of course, the mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterward, but - well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with - that revolting Skeeter woman buzzing around - no, poor man, he's having a well earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had someone he could rely upon to take his place."

Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy "Weatherby" yet, but resisted the temptation.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around - there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!"

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced up at Hermione to see how she felt about this new and more complicated method of dining - surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? - but for once, Hermione didn't seem to be thinking about S.P.E.W. She was deep in talk with Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and very enthusiastically at that.

"Veil, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was telling Hermione. "Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger even than these - though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains -"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy ., . one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets, and right to protect them?"

"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink.

Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Roger Davies.

"Zis is nothing," she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we 'ave ice sculptures all around ze dining chamber at Chreestmas. Zey do not melt, of course . . . zey are like 'uge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze food is seemply superb. And we 'ave choirs of wood nymphs, 'oo serenade us as we eat. We 'ave none of zis ugly armor in ze 'alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, 'e would be expelled like *zat*." She slapped her hand onto the table impatiently.

Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. Harry had the impression that Davies was too busy staring at Fleur to take in a word she was saying.

"Absolutely right," he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. "Like *that*. Yeah."

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table. Harry saw him give a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight.

Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her "Hermy-own."

"Her-my-oh-nee," she said slowly and clearly.

"Herm-own-ninny."

"Close enough," she said, catching Harry's eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

The "Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the

lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

"Come on!" Parvati hissed. "We're supposed to dance!"

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone's eye (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hands, placed one around her waist, and was holding the other tightly in hers.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes fixed over the heads of the watching people, and very soon many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. Neville and Ginny were dancing nearby - he could see Ginny wincing frequently as Neville trod on her feet - and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; however, she moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sinistra, who was nervously avoiding his wooden leg.

"Nice socks. Potter," Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry's robes.

"Oh - yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me," said Harry, grinning.

"He is so *creepy!*" Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. "I don't think that eye should be *allowed.*"

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

"Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Oh - but - this is a really good one!" Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

"No, I don't like it," Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so exuberantly that people around them were backing away in fear of injury, and over to the table where Ron and Padma were sitting.

"How's it going?" Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn't answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arms and legs crossed, one foot jiggling in time to the music. Every now and then she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry's other side, crossed her arms and legs too, and within minutes was asked to dance by a boy from Beauxbatons.

"You don't mind, do you, Harry?" Parvati said.

"What?" said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

"Oh never mind," snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did not return.

Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati's empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

"Hi," said Harry. Ron didn't say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand. "Viktors just

gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "*Viktor?*" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him *Vicky* yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what - ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You - you're -" Ron was obviously casting around for words strong enough to describe Hermione's crime, "*fraternizing with the enemy*, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Don't be so stupid!" she said after a moment. "The *enemy*! Honestly - who was the one who was all excited when they saw him arrive? Who was the one who wanted his autograph? Who's got a model of him up in their dormitory?"

Ron chose to ignore this. "I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. "So what?"

"What happened - trying to get him to join *spew*, were you?"

"No, I wasn't! If you *really* want to know, he - he said he'd been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me, but he hadn't been able to pluck up the courage!"

Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same color as Parvati's robes.

"Yeah, well - that's his story," said Ron nastily.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Obvious, isn't it? He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he? He knows who you hang around with. . . . He's just trying to get closer to Harry - get inside information on him - or get near enough to jinx him -"

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"For your information, he hasn't asked me *one single thing* about Harry, not one -"

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

"Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been putting your heads together during those cozy little library sessions -"

"I'd *never* help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, looking outraged. "*Never*. How could you say something like that - I want Harry to win the tournament. Harry knows that, don't you, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"This whole tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" said Hermione hotly.

"No it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

People were starting to stare at them.

"Ron," said Harry quietly, "I haven't got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum -"

But Ron ignored Harry too.

"Why don't you go and find Vicky, he'll be wondering where you are," said Ron.
"*Don't call him Vicky!*"

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go with a mixture of anger and satisfaction on his face.

"Are you going to ask me to dance at all?" Padma asked him.

"No," said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

"Fine," snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of his friends to join them so fast that Harry could have sworn he had zoomed him there by a Summoning Charm.

"Vare is Herm-own-ninny?" said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

"No idea," said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. "Lost her, have you?"

Krum was looking surly again.

"Veil, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks," he said, and he slouched off.

"Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?"

Percy had hustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. "Excellent! That's the whole point, you know - international magical cooperation!"

To Harry's displeasure, Percy now took Padma's vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore was dancing with Professor Sprout, Ludo Bagman with Professor McGonagall; Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students, and Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. When the next song ended, everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall's hand and make his way back through the crowds, at which point Fred and George accosted him.

"What do they think they're doing, annoying senior Ministry members?" Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. "*No respect...*"

Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, however, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to their table.

"I hope my brothers weren't bothering you, Mr. Bagman?" said Percy at once.

"What? Oh not at all, not at all!" said Bagman. "No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of theirs. Wondering if I could advise them on the marketing. I've promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. ..."

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about this the moment he got home. Apparently Fred and George's plans had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the public. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Harry something, but Percy diverted him.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? *Our* department's quite satisfied - the hitch with the Goblet of Fire" - he glanced at Harry - "was a little unfortunate, of course, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Bagman said cheerfully, "it's all been enormous fun. How's old Barty doing? Shame he couldn't come."

"Oh I'm sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time," said Percy importantly, "but in the meantime, I'm more than willing to take up the slack. Of course, it's not all attending balls" - he laughed airily - "oh no, I've had to deal with all sorts of things that

have cropped up in his absence - you heard Ali Bashir was caught smuggling a consignment of flying carpets into the country? And then we've been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Ban on Dueling. I've got a meeting with their Head of Magical Cooperation in the new year -"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron muttered to Harry, "get away from Percy. ..."

Pretending they wanted more drinks. Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the entrance hall. The front doors stood open, and the fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes; winding, ornamental paths; and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Ron set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

"... don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroff's voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it _"

"Then flee," said Snape's voice curtly. "Flee - I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression most ill-natured. Squeals issued from many of the bushes, and dark shapes emerged from them.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!" Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. "And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!" as a boy went rushing after her. "And what are you two doing?" he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed to see them standing there. His hand went nervously to his goatee, and he began winding it around his finger.

"We're walking," Ron told Snape shortly. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff hurried away after Snape. Harry and Ron continued down the path.

"What's got Karkaroff all worried?" Ron muttered.

"And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?" said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy outlines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

"Momen' I saw yeh, I knew," he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

Harry and Ron froze. This didn't sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. . . . Harry looked around, back up the path, and saw Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies standing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, meaning that they could easily sneak off that way without being noticed (Fleur and Davies looked very busy to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in horror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head vigorously, and pulled Harry deeper into the shadows behind the reindeer.

"What did you know, 'Agrid?" said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn't want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he certainly would have) - if it had been possible he would have put his fingers in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn't really an option. Instead he tried to interest himself in a beetle crawling along the stone reindeer's back, but the beetle just wasn't interesting enough to block out Hagrid's next words.

"I jus' knew . . . knew you were like me. . . . Was it yer mother or yer father?"

"I - I don't know what you mean, 'Agrid. ..."

"It was my mother," said Hagrid quietly. "She was one o' the las' ones in Britain. 'Course, I can't remember her too well. . . she left, see. When I was abou' three. She wasn't really the maternal sort. Well. . . it's not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her . . . might be dead fer all I know. ..."

Madame Maxime didn't say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the top of the reindeer's antlers, listening. ... He had never heard Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

"Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen'. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an' put him on top o' the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. . . ." Hagrid's deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. "Dad raised me . . . but he died, o' course, jus' after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. . . ."

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

"So ... anyway . . . enough abou' me. What about you? Which side you got it on?"

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

"It is chilly," she said - but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. "I think I will go in now."

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. "No, don go! I've - I've never met another one before!"

"Anuzzer *what*, precisely?" said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping against hope he wouldn't - but it was no good.

"Another half-giant, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"Ow dare you!" shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind him. Harry heard Fleur and Roger fall out of their rosebush. "I 'ave nevair been more insulted in my life! 'Alf-giant? *Moi*? I 'ave - I 'ave big bones!"

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes. Hagrid was still sitting on the bench, staring after her. It was much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the castle, but off out into the dark grounds in the direction of his cabin.

"C'mon," Harry said, very quietly to Ron. "Let's go. . . ."

But Ron didn't move.

"What's up?" said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

"Did you know?" he whispered. "About Hagrid being half-giant?"

"No," Harry said, shrugging. "So what?"

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the wizarding world. Brought up by the Dursleys, there were many things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. Now, however, he could tell that most wizards would not have said "So what?" upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

"I'll explain inside," said Ron quietly, "c'mon. . ."

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Great Hall. Parvati and Padma were now sitting at a distant table with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down at a table far removed from the dance floor.

"So?" Harry prompted Ron. "What's the problem with giants?"

"Well, they're . . . they're . . ." Ron struggled for words. ". . . not very nice," he finished lamely.

"Who cares?" Harry said. "There's nothing wrong with Hagrid!"

"I know there isn't, but. . . blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet," Ron said, shaking his head. "I always thought he'd got in the way of a bad Engorgement Charm when he was a kid or something. Didn't like to mention it. . ."

"But what's it matter if his mother was a giantess?" said Harry.

"Well... no one who knows him will care, 'cos they'll know he's not dangerous," said Ron slowly. "But. . . Harry, they're just vicious, giants. It's like Hagrid said, it's in their natures, they're like trolls . . . they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got themselves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants abroad, though. . . . They hide out in mountains mostly. . . ."

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table, looking very somber. "If Hagrid's half-giant, she definitely is. Big bones . . . the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. Harry tried not to watch Cho and Cedric too much; it gave him a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall. Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, the evening hadn't been much fun.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang ship. She gave Ron a very cold look and swept past him up the marble staircase without speaking. Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling him.

"Hey-Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the entrance hall below.

"Yeah?" said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him.

Cedric looked as though he didn't want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered, and continued to climb the stairs.

"Listen ..." Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that golden egg? Does yours wail when you open it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well... take a bath, okay?"

"What?"

"Take a bath, and - er - take the egg with you, and - er - just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think. . . . Trust me."

Harry stared at him.

"Tell you what," Cedric said, "use the prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password's 'pine fresh.' Gotta go ... want to say good night -"

He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him to work out what the wailing egg meant? Was Cedric pulling his leg? Was he trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison?

The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell "Fairy lights!" before he woke them up, and when he did, they were extremely irritated. He climbed into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart, they were bellowing at each other, each scarlet in the face.

"Well, if you don't like it, you know what the solution is, don't you?" yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of its elegant bun now, and her face was screwed up in anger.

"Oh yeah?" Ron yelled back. "What's that?"

"Next time there's a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!"

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls' staircase to bed. Ron turned to look at Harry.

"Well," he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, "well - that just proves - completely missed the point -"

Harry didn't say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now - but he somehow thought that Hermione had gotten the point much better than Ron had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – RITA SKEETER'S SCOOP

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor common room was much quieter than it had been lately, many yawns punctuating the lazy conversations. Hermione's hair was bushy again; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's way too much bother to do every day," she said matter-of-factly, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement not to discuss

their argument. They were being quite friendly to each other, though oddly formal. Ron and Harry wasted no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard between Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but Hermione didn't seem to find the news that Hagrid was a half-giant nearly as shocking as Ron did.

"Well, I thought he must be," she said, shrugging. "I knew he couldn't be pure giant because they're about twenty feet tall. But honestly, all this hysteria about giants. They can't *all* be horrible. . . . It's the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. . . . It's just bigotry, isn't it?"

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn't want another row, because he contented himself with shaking his head disbelievingly while Hermione wasn't looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be feeling rather flat now that Christmas was over - everybody except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn't done anything about working out the clue inside the golden egg. He therefore started taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening intently, hoping that this time it would make some sense. He strained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything else like it. He closed the egg, shook it vigorously, and opened it again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn't. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but nothing happened. He even threw the egg across the room - though he hadn't really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now meant that he was keen not to take his help if he could avoid it. In any case, it seemed to him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more explicit. He, Harry, had told Cedric exactly what was coming in the first task - and Cedric's idea of a fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that sort of rubbishy help - not from someone who kept walking down corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, weighed down with books, parchment, and quills as usual, but also with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door.

"Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" said Ron, staring at her. "Wheres Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated loudly.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harry's ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining the class. All of them looked gleeful, and none of them looked surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"This way, please," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shivering. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, looking back over their shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls "ooooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered Lavender Brown. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. "They prefer the woman's touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care, come on, easy does it. ..."

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. The moment Professor Grubbly-Plank was out of earshot. Harry turned to Ron.

"What d'you reckons wrong with him? You don't think a skrewt - ?"

"Oh he hasn't been attacked, Potter, if that's what you're thinking," said Malfoy softly. "No, he's just too ashamed to show his big, ugly face."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newsprint.

"There you go," he said. "Hate to break it to you. Potter. ..."

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. It was an article topped with a picture of Hagrid looking extremely shiftily.

DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that

caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening."

"I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm," says Draco Malfoy, a fourth-year student. "We all hate Hagrid, but we're just too scared to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a *Daily Prophet* reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed "Blast-Ended Skrewts," highly dangerous crosses between manti-cores and fire-crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions.

"I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the *Daily Prophet* has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not - as he has always pretended - a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Fridwulfa's son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close

friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who's fall from power - thereby driving Hagrid's own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend - but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open. "How did she find out?" he whispered.

But that wasn't what was bothering Harry.

"What d'you mean, 'we all hate Hagrid'?" Harry spat at Malfoy. "What's this rubbish about *him*" - he pointed at Crabbe - "getting a bad bite off a flobberworm? They haven't even got teeth!"

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

"Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf's teaching career," said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. "Half-giant. . . and there was me thinking he'd just swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro when he was young. . . None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. . . They'll be worried he'll eat their kids, ha, ha. . ."

"You--"

"Are you paying attention over there?"

Professor Grubbly-Planks voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Harry was so angry that the *Daily Prophet* article shook in his hands as he turned to stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was now enumerating in a loud voice, so that the boys could hear too.

"I hope she stays, that woman!" said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the castle for lunch. "That's more what I thought Care of Magical Creatures would be like . . . proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. . . ."

"What about Hagrid?" Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

"What about him?" said Parvati in a hard voice. "He can still be gamekeeper, can't he?"

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He supposed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention, but she seemed to have had a good time all the same. She was certainly telling anybody who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade on the next weekend trip.

"That was a really good lesson," said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. "I didn't know half the things Professor Grubbly-Plank told us about uni -"

"Look at this!" Harry snarled, and he shoved the *Daily Prophet* article under Hermione's nose.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron's.

"How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don't think Hagrid *told* her?"

"No," said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. "He never even told us, did he? I reckon she was so mad he wouldn't give her loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him

back."

"Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball," said Hermione quietly.

"We'd have seen her in the garden!" said Ron. "Anyway, she's not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her. . . ."

"Maybe she's got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. "Sort of thing she'd do, isn't it, hide in bushes listening to people."

"Like you and Ron did, you mean," said Hermione.

"We weren't trying to hear him!" said Ron indignantly. "We didn't have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his giantess mother where anyone could have heard him!"

"We've got to go and see him," said Harry. "This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back . . . you *do* want him back?" he shot at Hermione.

"I - well, I'm not going to pretend it didn't make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once - but I do want Hagrid back, of course I do!" Hermione added hastily, quailing under Harry's furious stare.

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid's cabin. They knocked, and Fang's booming barks answered.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry shouted, pounding on the door. "Open up!"

Hagrid didn't answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn't open. They hammered on it for ten more minutes; Ron even went and banged on one of the windows, but there was no response.

"What's he avoiding *us* for?" Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. "He surely doesn't think we'd care about him being half-giant?"

But it seemed that Hagrid did care. They didn't see a sign of him all week. He didn't appear at the staff table at mealtimes, they didn't see him going about his gamekeeper duties on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating at every possible opportunity.

"Missing your half-breed pal?" he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe from Harry's retaliation. "Missing the elephant-man?"

There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermione was very surprised that Harry was going to go.

"I just thought you'd want to take advantage of the common room being quiet," she said. "Really get to work on that egg."

"Oh I - I reckon I've got a pretty good idea what it's about now," Harry lied.

"Have you really?" said Hermione, looking impressed. "Well done!"

Harry's insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and that was ages. . . whereas if he went into Hogsmeade, he might run into Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the gates. As they passed the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they saw Viktor Krum emerge onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but apparently a lot tougher than he looked, because

he climbed up onto the side of the ship, stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

"He's mad!" said Harry, staring at Krums dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. "It must be freezing, it's January!"

"It's a lot colder where he comes from," said Hermione. "I suppose it feels quite warm to him."

"Yeah, but there's still the giant squid," said Ron. He didn't sound anxious - if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione noticed his tone of voice and frowned.

"He's really nice, you know," she said. "He's not at all like you'd think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here, he told me."

Ron said nothing. He hadn't mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed on Boxing Day, which had looked very much as though it had been snapped off a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the Three Broomsticks once he had ascertained that Hagrid was not in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn't there. Heart sinking, he went up to the bar with Ron and Hermione, ordered three butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the egg wailing after all.

"Doesn't he *ever* go into the office?" Hermione whispered suddenly. "Look!"

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner with a bunch of goblins. Bagman was talking very fast in a low voice to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd. Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no Triwizard event, and therefore no judging to be done. He watched Bagman in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark had appeared. But just then Bagman glanced over at the bar, saw Harry, and stood up.

"In a moment, in a moment!" Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub toward Harry, his boyish grin back in place.

"Harry!" he said. "How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry.

"Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?" said Bagman eagerly. "You couldn't give us a moment, you two, could you?"

"Er - okay," said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

"Well, I just thought I'd congratulate you again on your splendid performance against that Horntail, Harry," said Bagman. "Really superb."

"Thanks," said Harry, but he knew this couldn't be all that Bagman wanted to say, because he could have congratulated Harry in front of Ron and Hermione. Bagman didn't seem in any particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were all watching him and Harry in silence through their dark, slanting eyes.

"Absolute nightmare," said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. "Their English isn't too good . . . it's like being back with all the Bulgarians at the Quidditch World Cup . . . but at least *they* used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep gabbling in Gobblede-gook . . . and I only know one word of Gobbledegook. *Bladvak*. It means 'pickax.' I don't like to use it in case they think I'm threatening them."

He gave a short, booming laugh.

"What do they want?" Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

"Er - well. . ." said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. "They ... er ... they're looking for Barty Crouch."

"Why are they looking for him here?" said Harry. "He's at the Ministry in London, isn't he?"

"Er ... as a matter of fact, I've no idea where he is," said Bagman. "He's sort of... stopped coming to work. Been absent for a couple of weeks now. Young Percy, his assistant, says he's ill. Apparently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone. Harry? Because Rita Skeeter's still poking around everywhere she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Bartys illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing like Bertha Jorkins."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course ..." (*About time*, thought Harry) "and it's all very strange. She definitely *arrived* in Albania, because she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt. . . and she seems to have vanished without trace en route. Blowed if I can see where she's got to ... she doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance . . . but still. . . What are we doing, talking about goblins and Bertha Jorkins? I really wanted to ask you" - he lowered his voice - "how are you getting on with your golden egg?"

"Er . . . not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this . . . you were thrown into this tournament, you didn't volunteer for it... and if. . ." (his voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all... a prod in the right direction . . . I've taken a liking to you . . . the way you got past that dragon! . . . well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

"We're supposed to work out the clues alone, aren't we?" he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was accusing the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports of breaking the rules.

"Well. . . well, yes," said Bagman impatiently, "but - come on. Harry - we all want a Hogwarts victory, don't we?"

"Have you offered Cedric help?" Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman's smooth face. "No, I haven't," he said. "I - well, like I say, I've taken a liking to you. Just thought I'd offer ..."

"Well, thanks," said Harry, "but I think I'm nearly there with the egg . . . couple more days should crack it."

He wasn't entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman's help, except that Bagman

was almost a stranger to him, and accepting his assistance would feel somehow much more like cheating than asking advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn't say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

"Hello, Mr. Bagman," said Fred brightly. "Can we buy you a drink?"

"Er . . . no," said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, "no, thank you, boys ..."

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down badly.

"Well, I must dash," he said. "Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry."

He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

"What did he want?" Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

"He offered to help me with the golden egg," said Harry.

"He shouldn't be doing that!" said Hermione, looking very shocked. "He's one of the judges! And anyway, you've already worked it out - haven't you?"

"Er . . . nearly," said Harry.

"Well, I don't think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bagman was trying to persuade you to cheat!" said Hermione, still looking deeply disapproving. "I hope he's trying to help Cedric as much!"

"He's not, I asked," said Harry.

"Who cares if Diggory's getting help?" said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

"Those goblins didn't look very friendly," said Hermione, sipping her butterbeer. "What were they doing here?"

"Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman," said Harry. "He's still ill. Hasn't been into work."

"Maybe Percys poisoning him," said Ron. "Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he'll be made head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

Hermione gave Ron a don't-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, "Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. . . . They'd normally deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though," said Harry. "Maybe they need an interpreter."

"Worrying about poor 'ickle goblins, now, are you?" Ron asked Hermione. "Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something? Society for the Protection of Ugly Goblins?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Hermione sarcastically. "Goblins don't need protection. Haven't you been listening to what Professor Binns has been telling us about goblin rebellions?"

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

"Well, the/re quite capable of dealing with wizards," said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. "They're very clever. They're not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves."

"Uh-oh," said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by her paunchy

photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glaring at her as she approached. She was talking fast and looking very satisfied about something.

"... didn't seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what's he doing with a pack of goblins in tow anyway? Showing them the sights ... what nonsense ... he was always a bad liar. Reckon something's up? Think we should do a bit of digging? 'Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman ...' Snappy start to a sentence, Bozo - we just need to find a story to fit it -"

"Trying to ruin someone else's life?" said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter's eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

"Harry!" she said, beaming. "How lovely! Why don't you come and join-?"

"I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot broomstick," said Harry furiously.

"What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?"

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

"Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my—"

"Who cares if he's half-giant?" Harry shouted. "There's nothing wrong with him!"

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was staring over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to the fact that the flagon she was filling with mead was overflowing.

Rita Skeeter's smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill, and said, "How about giving me an interview about the Hagrid *you* know. Harry? The man behind the muscles? Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it. Would you call him a father substitute?"

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

"You horrible woman," she said, through gritted teeth, "you don't care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, wont they? Even Ludo Bagman -"

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't talk about things you don't understand," said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. "I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl... *not* that it needs it -" she added, eyeing Hermione's bushy hair.

"Let's go," said Hermione, "c'mon. Harry - Ron . . ."

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill was out; it was zooming backward and forward over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and worried voice as they walked quickly back up the street.

"Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back for this. First Harry, then Hagrid ..."

"You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron nervously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you -"

"My parents don't read the *Daily Prophet*. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that it was all Harry and Ron could do to keep up

with her. The last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face. "And Hagrid isn't hiding anymore! He should *never* have let that excuse for a human being upset him! Come *on!*"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up through the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman do this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being -"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About t-!" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

"We-er-we wanted to see Hagrid," said Hermione in a rather small voice.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Why don't you come in?"

"Oh . . . um ... okay," said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched himself upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. Harry fended off Fang and looked around.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

"Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, "Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?"

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, "Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door."

"Of course we still want to know you!" Harry said, staring at Hagrid. "You don't think anything that Skeeter cow - sorry, Professor," he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

"I have gone temporarily deaf and haven't any idea what you said. Harry," said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling.

"Er-right," said Harry sheepishly. "I just meant-Hagrid, how could you think we'd care what that-woman-wrote about you?"

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

"Living proof of what I've been telling you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. "I have shown you the letters from the countless

parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it -"

"Not all of 'em," said Hagrid hoarsely. "Not all of 'em wan me ter stay."

"Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I'm afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time," said Dumbledore, now peering sternly over his half-moon spectacles. "Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven't had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?"

"Yeh - yeh're not half-giant!" said Hagrid croakily.

"Hagrid, look what I've got for relatives!" Harry said furiously. "Look at the Dursleys!"

"An excellent point," said Professor Dumbledore. "My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat. It was all over the papers, but did Aberforth hide? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I'm not entirely sure he can read, so that may not have been bravery. . . ."

"Come back and teach, Hagrid," said Hermione quietly, "please come back, we really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fangs ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Hermione kept patting his arm, and at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore . . . great man . . ."

"Yeah, he is," said Ron. "Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?"

"Help yerself," said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. "Ar, he's righ', o' course - yeh're all righ' . . . I bin stupid . . . my ol' dad woulda bin ashamed o' the way I've bin behavin'..." More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, "Never shown you a picture of my old dad, have I? Here..."

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid's crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid's shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, round, and smooth - he looked hardly older than eleven.

"Tha was taken jus' after I got inter Hogwarts," Hagrid croaked. "Dad was dead chuffed ... thought I migh' not be a wizard, see, 'cos me mum ... well, anyway. 'Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really... but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. . . ."

"Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job . . . trusts people, he does. Gives 'em second chances ... tha's what sets him apar' from other heads, see. He'll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s'long as they've got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren' ... well... all tha' respectable. But some don understand that. There's some who'd always hold it against yeh . . . there's some who'd even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an'

say - I am what I am, an' I'm not ashamed. 'Never be ashamed,' my ol' dad used ter say, 'there's some who'll hold it against you, but they're not worth botherin' with.' An' he was right. I've bin an idiot. I'm not botherin' with *her* no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones . . . I'll give her big bones."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts for a walk than admit to Hagrid that he had overheard him talking to Madame Maxime, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

"Yeh know wha, Harry?" he said, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, "when I firs' met you, you reminded me o' me a bit. Mum an' Dad gone, an' you was feelin' like yeh wouldn' fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it... an' now look at yeh, Harry! School champion!"

He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, "Yeh know what I'd love. Harry? I'd love yeh ter win, I really would. It'd show 'em all... yeh don' have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It'd show 'em Dumbledore's the one who's got it righ', lettin' anyone in as long as they can do magic. How you doin' with that egg, Harry?"

"Great," said Harry. "Really great."

Hagrid's miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

"Tha's my boy. . . you show 'em, Harry, you show 'em. Beat 'em all."

Lying to Hagrid wasn't quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Hermione, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid's whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more heavily than ever on Harry's conscience that evening, and by the time he had got into bed, he had made up his mind - it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric's hint was worth anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – THE EGG AND THE EYE

Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at night, when he would be able to take as much time as he wanted. Reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people were allowed in there, so it was much less likely that he would be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker in the middle of the night once before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. The Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought he would take the Marauders Map, which, next to the cloak, was the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hogwarts, including its many shortcuts and secret passageways and, most important of all, it revealed the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned if somebody was approaching the bathroom.

On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the night when Hagrid had shown him the dragons, waited for the portrait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"), "Good luck," Ron muttered, climbing

into the room as Harry crept out past him.

It was awkward moving under the cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held in front of his nose with the other. However, the moonlit corridors were empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone he wanted to avoid. When he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned close to it, and muttered the password, "Pine fresh," just as Cedric had told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around.

His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was softly lit by a splendid candle-filled chandelier, and everything was made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. About a hundred golden taps stood all around the pool's edges, each with a differently colored Jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung at the windows; a large pile of fluffy white towels sat in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who was fast asleep on a rock, her long hair over her face. It fluttered every time she snored.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was - and quite keen though he was to try out a few of those taps - now he was here he couldn't quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this supposed to help solve the mystery of the egg? Nevertheless, he put one of the fluffy towels, the cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down and turned on a few of the taps.

He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn't bubble bath as Harry had ever experienced it. One tap gushed pink and blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported his weight if he'd cared to test it; a third sent heavily perfumed purple clouds hovering over the surface of the water. Harry amused himself for awhile turning the taps on and off, particularly enjoying the effect of one whose jet bounced off the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a very short time considering its size, Harry turned off all the taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the side and treading water, staring at the egg. Highly enjoyable though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, no stroke of brilliance came to him, no sudden burst of understanding.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom, echoing and reverberating off the marble walls, but it sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that the sound would attract Filch, wondering whether that hadn't been Cedric's plan - and then, making him jump so badly that he dropped the egg, which clattered away across the bathroom floor, someone spoke.

"I'd try putting it *in* the water, if I were you."

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a very glum-looking girl sitting cross-legged on top of one of the taps. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

"Myrtle!" Harry said in outrage, "I'm - I'm not wearing anything!"

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from out of one of the taps ever since he had arrived.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick spectacles. "You haven't been to see me for *ages*."

"Yeah . . . well. . ." said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn't see anything but his head, "I'm not supposed to come into your bathroom, am I? It's a girls' one."

"You didn't used to care," said Myrtle miserably. "You used to be in there all the time."

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle's out-of-order toilets a convenient place to brew Polyjuice Potion in secret - a forbidden potion that had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

"I got told off for going in there," said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtle's bathroom. "I thought I'd better not come back after that."

"Oh ... I see ..." said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. "Well... anyway... I'd try the egg in the water. That's what Cedric Diggory did."

"Have you been spying on him too?" said Harry indignantly. "What d'you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the prefects take baths?"

"Sometimes," said Myrtle, rather slyly, "but I've never come out to speak to anyone before."

"I'm honored," said Harry darkly. "You keep your eyes shut!"

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoisting himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly around his waist, and going to retrieve the egg. Once he was back in the water, Myrtle peered through her fingers and said, "Go on, then . . . open it under the water!"

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it... and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song was coming out of it, a song whose words he couldn't distinguish through the water.

"You need to put your head under too," said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. "Go on!"

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface - and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he heard a chorus of eerie voices singing to him from the open egg in his hands:

**"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,**

**An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour- the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it wont come back"**

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah ... 'Come seek us where our voices sound .. .' and if I need persuading ... hang on, I need to listen again...."

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg's song before Harry had it memorized; then he trod water for a while, thinking hard, while Myrtle sat and watched him.

"I've got to go and look for people who can't use their voices above the ground. . . ." he said slowly. "Er . . . who could that be?"

"Slow, aren't you?"

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of PolyJuice Potion had given Hermione the hairy face and tail of a cat. Harry stared around the bathroom, thinking ... if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures. He ran this theory past Myrtle, who smirked at him.

"Well, thats what Diggory thought," she said. "He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages . . . nearly all the bubbles had gone. ..."

"Underwater ..." Harry said slowly. "Myrtle . . . what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Oh all sorts," she said. "I sometimes go down there . . . sometimes don't have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet when I'm not expecting it...."

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet. Harry said, "Well, does anything in there have a human voice? Hang on -"

Harry's eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

"Myrtle, there aren't *merpeople* in there, are there?"

"Oooh, very good," she said, her thick glasses twinkling, "it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with *her* awake too" - Myrtle jerked her head toward the mermaid with an expression of great dislike on her glum face - "giggling and showing off and flashing her fins. . ."

"Thats it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The second tasks to go and find the merpeople in the lake and ... and ..."

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just pulled a plug in his stomach. He wasn't a very good swimmer; he'd never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping that Harry would drown one day, hadn't bothered to give him any. A couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep . . . and merpeople would surely live right at the bottom. . . .

"Myrtle," Harry said slowly, "how am I supposed to *breathe*?"

At this, Myrtle's eyes filled with sudden tears again.

"Tactless!" she muttered, groping in her robes for a handkerchief.

"What's tactless?" said Harry, bewildered.

"Talking about breathing in front of *me!*" she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. "When I can't. . . when I haven't. . . not for ages ..."

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about being dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it.

"Sorry," he said impatiently. "I didn't mean - I just forgot. . ."

"Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle's dead," said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. "Nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours and hours to find my body - I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom - Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?' she said, 'because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you -' And then she saw my body . . . oooh, she didn't forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that... followed her around and reminded her, I did. I remember at her brother's wedding -"

But Harry wasn't listening; he was thinking about the merpeople's song again. "*We've taken what you II sorely miss.*" That sounded as though they were going to steal something of his, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

"--and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in my toilet."

"Good," said Harry vaguely. "Well, I'm a lot further on than I was. . . . Shut your eyes again, will you? I'm getting out."

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown again.

"Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?" Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the Invisibility Cloak.

"Er . . . I'll try," Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he'd be visiting Myrtle's bathroom again was if every other toilet in the castle got blocked. "See you. Myrtle... thanks for your help."

"Bye, 'bye," she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisiblity Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap.

Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauders Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris, were safely in their office . . . nothing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing around the trophy room on the floor above. . . . Harry had taken his first step back toward Gryffindor Tower when something else on the map caught his eye . . . something distinctly odd.

Peeves was *not* the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner - Snape's office. But the dot wasn't labeled "Severus Snape" . . . it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball - so what was he doing, sneaking into Hogwarts at one o'clock in the morning? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. . . .

Harry hesitated, thinking . . . and then his curiosity got the better of him. He

turned and set off in the opposite direction toward the nearest staircase. He was going to see what Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at the squeak of a floorboard, the rustle of his pajamas. He crept along the corridor below, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase, a shortcut that would take him down two floors. He kept glancing down at the map, wondering ... It just didn't seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be sneaking around somebody else's office this late at night...

And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the peculiar behavior of Mr. Crouch, Harry's leg suddenly sank right through the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wobble, and the golden egg, still damp from the bath, slipped from under his arm. He lurched forward to try and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step - the Invisibility Cloak slipped - Harry snatched at it, and the Marauder's Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee, he couldn't reach it.

The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor below. Harry pulled out his wand and struggled to touch the Marauder's Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach -

Pulling the cloak back over himself Harry straightened up, listening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear. . . and, almost immediately -

"PEEVES!"

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming nearer and nearer, his wheezy voice raised in fury.

"What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll... and what is this?"

Filch's footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped - Filch had picked up the egg and closed it. Harry stood very still, one leg still jammed tightly in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves . . . and there would be no Peeves ... but if he came up the stairs, he would spot the Marauder's Map . . . and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show "Harry Potter" standing exactly where he was.

"Egg?" Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. "My sweet!" - Mrs. Norris was obviously with him - "This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion!" Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast -

"PEEVES!" Filch roared gleefully. "You've been stealing!"

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark and (to Filch) deserted staircase.

"Hiding, are you?" he said softly. "I'm coming to get you, Peeves. . . . You've gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves... . Dumbledore'll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist. ..."

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Morris's lamp-like eyes, so very like her masters, were fixed directly upon Harry. He had had occasion before now to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. . . . Sick with apprehension, he watched Filch drawing nearer and nearer in his old flannel

dressing gown - he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches - any second now, Filch was going to spot the map or walk right into him -

"Filch? Whats going on?"

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry's situation worse: Snape. He was wearing a long gray nightshirt and he looked livid.

"Its Peeves, Professor," Filch whispered malevolently. "He threw this egg down the stairs."

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping heart would give him away at any second. . . .

"Peeves?" said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch's hands. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office. . . ."

"This egg was in your office. Professor?"

"Of course not," Snape snapped. "I heard banging and wailing -"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg -"

"- I was coming to investigate -"

"- Peeves threw it. Professor -"

"- and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!"

But Peeves couldn't -"

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Snape snapped again. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!" Snape looked up the stairs, straight through Harry, and then down into the corridor below. "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

"I - yes, Professor - but -"

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of cornering Peeves. *Go*, Harry pleaded with him silently, *go with Snape . . . go . . .* Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch's legs.... Harry had the distinct impression that she could smell him. . . . Why had he filled that bath with so much perfumed foam?

"The thing is, Professor," said Filch plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all -"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's -"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody limp into sight through the narrow gap between their heads. Moody was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch at once. "Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual - and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off -"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moody's magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. *Moody could see through Invisibility Cloaks...* he alone could see the full strangeness of the scene:

Snape in his nightshirt, Filch clutching the egg, and he, Harry, trapped in the stairs behind them. Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For a few seconds, he and Harry stared straight into each other's eyes. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

"Did I hear that correctly, Snape?" he asked slowly. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," said Snape coldly. "On the contrary," growled Moody, "it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," said Snape. Harry could see a vein flickering horribly on Snape's greasy temple. "It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard ... students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt...."

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" said Moody. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Harry saw the edge of Snape's sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

Moody's face twisted into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye -"

"Dumbledore happens to trust me," said Snape through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me - I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though something on it had hurt him.

Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time.... You've dropped something, by the way. ..."

With a stab of horror. Harry saw Moody point at the Marauders Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him. As Snape and Filch both turned to look at it, Harry threw caution to the winds; he raised his arms under the cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing "It's mine! *Mine!*"

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face -

"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snape's outstretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moody's hand.

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine - must've dropped it earlier -"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moody's hand, and Harry could tell he was putting two and two together, as only Snape

could. . . .

"Potter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared right at the place where Harry was, as though he could suddenly see him. "That egg is Potters egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-large nostrils were dilating, trying to sniff Harry out - trapped. Harry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snapes fingertips, but any moment now-

"There's nothing there, Snape!" barked Moody, "but I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry's chest.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy!" said Moody, limping nearer still to the foot of the stairs. "And so am I, Snape . . . very interested...." The torchlight flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from his nose, looked deeper and darker than ever.

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn't see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved or said anything. Then Snape slowly lowered his hands.

"I merely thought," said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, "that if Potter was wandering around after hours again ... it's an unfortunate habit of his ... he should be stopped. For - for his own safety."

"Ah, I see," said Moody softly. "Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each other, Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering around Filch's legs, looking for the source of Harry's bubble-bath smell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg-"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his firstborn son.

"Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. "Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who stared blankly at Harry for a few more seconds before turning and following her master. Still breathing very fast. Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody the egg and disappeared from view too, muttering to Mrs. Norris. "Never mind. my sweet.. . we'll see Dumbledore in the morning ... tell him what Peeves was up to...."

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to climb laboriously toward him, a dull *clunk* on every other step.

"Close shave. Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah ... I - er ... thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauder's Map out of his pocket and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting him.

"Merlins beard," Moody whispered, staring at the map, his magical eye going haywire. "This ... this is some map. Potter!"

"Yeah, its ... quite useful," Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. "Er - Professor Moody, d'you think you could help me - ?"

"What? Oh! Yes ... yes, of course ..."

Moody took hold of Harry's arms and pulled; Harry's leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above it. Moody was still gazing at the map.

"Potter ..." he said slowly, "you didn't happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snape's office, did you? On this map, I mean?"

"Er ... yeah, I did" Harry admitted. "It was Mr. Crouch."

Moody's magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

"Crouch?" he said. "You're - you're sure. Potter?"

"Positive," said Harry.

"Well, he's not here anymore," said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. "Crouch ... that's very - very interesting... ."

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody and very much wanted to know what it was. He wondered whether he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly. ... yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. ...

"Er ... Professor Moody ... why d'you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snape's office?"

Moody's magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that Moody was sizing him up, wondering whether to answer or not, or how much to tell him.

"Put it this way. Potter," Moody muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark wizards ... but I'm nothing - *nothing* - compared to Barty Crouch."

He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

"Professor Moody?" he said again. "D'you think... could this have anything to do with ... maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there's something going on. ..."

"Like what?" said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn't want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside Hogwarts; that might lead to tricky questions about Sirius.

"I don't know," Harry muttered, "odd stuffs been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the *Daily Prophet*... the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything..."

Both of Moody's mismatched eyes widened.

"You're a sharp boy. Potter," he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder's Map. "Crouch could be thinking along those lines," he said slowly. "Very

possible. . . there have been some funny rumors flying around lately - helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people nervous, I reckon." A grim smile twisted his lopsided mouth. "Oh if there's one thing I hate," he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-hand corner of the map, "its a Death Eater who walked free. ..."

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

"And now I want to ask *you* a question. Potter," said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harry's heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was a very dubious magical object - and the story of how it had fallen into his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Moody waved the map in front of Harry, who braced himself-

"Can I borrow this?"

"Oh!" said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn't asking where he'd got it, and there was no doubt that he owed Moody a favor.

"Yeah, okay."

"Good boy," growled Moody. "I can make good use of this . . . this might be *exactly* what I've been looking for. . . . Right, bed, Potter, come on, now. ..."

They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still examining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which he had never seen before. They walked in silence to the door of Moody's office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

"You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, taken aback.

"You want to consider it," said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed ... and incidentally ... I'm guessing you werent Just taking that egg for a walk tonight?"

"Er - no," said Harry, grinning. "I've been working out the clue."

Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again. "Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. . . . See you in the morning...."

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauders Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant.... Why was Crouch pretending to be ill, if he could manage to get to Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he. Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interesting idea.. . but somehow. Harry thought, as he got quietly into his four-poster ten minutes later, the egg and the cloak now safely back in his trunk, he thought he'd like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a career.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – THE SECOND TASK

You said you'd already worked out that egg clue!" said Hermione indignantly.

"Keep your voice down!" said Harry crossly. "I just need to - sort of fine-tune it, all right?"

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the opposite of the Summoning Charm today - the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room. Professor Flitwick had given each student a stack of cushions on which to practice, the theory being that these wouldn't hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn't working very well. Neville's aim was so poor that he kept accidentally sending much heavier things flying across the room - Professor Flitwick, for instance.

"Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?" Harry hissed as Professor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, landing on top of a large cabinet. "I'm trying to tell you about Snape and Moody. ..."

This class was an ideal cover for a private conversation, as everyone was having far too much fun to pay them any attention. Harry had been recounting his adventures of the previous night in whispered installments for the last half hour.

"Snape said Moody searched his office as well?" Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he Banished a cushion with a sweep of his wand (it soared into the air and knocked Parvati's hat off). "What. . . d'you reckon Moody's here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?"

"Well, I dunno if that's what Dumbledore asked him to do, but he's definitely doing it," said Harry, waving his wand without paying much attention, so that his cushion did an odd sort of belly flop off the desk. "Moody said Dumbledore only lets Snape stay here because he's giving him a second chance or something. ..."

"What?" said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and dropping heavily onto Flitwick's desk. "Harry... maybe Moody thinks *Snape* put your name in the Goblet of Fire!"

"Oh Ron," said Hermione, shaking her head sceptically, "we thought Snape was trying to kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry's life, remember?"

She Banished a cushion and it flew across the room and landed in the box they were all supposed to be aiming at. Harry looked at Hermione, thinking... it was true that Snape had saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he'd loathed Harry's father when they had been at school together. Snape loved taking points from Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be suspended from the school.

"I don't care what Moody says," Hermione went on. "Dumbledore's not stupid. He was right to trust Hagrid and Professor Lupin, even though loads of people wouldn't have given them jobs, so why shouldn't he be right about Snape, even if Snape is a bit -"

"- evil," said Ron promptly. "Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?"

"Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?" said Hermione, ignoring Ron. "It's a bit funny, isn't it, that he can't manage to come to the Yule Ball, but he can get up here in the middle of the night when he wants to?"

"You just don't like Crouch because of that elf, Winky," said Ron, sending a cushion soaring into the window.

"*You* just want to think Snapes up to something," said Hermione, sending her

cushion zooming neatly into the box.

"I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he's on his second one," said Harry grimly, and his cushion, to his very great surprise, flew straight across the room and landed neatly on top of Hermione's.

Obedient to Sirius's wish of hearing about anything odd at Hogwarts, Harry sent him a letter by brown owl that night, explaining all about Mr. Crouch breaking into Snape's office, and Moody and Snape's conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him: how to survive underwater for an hour on the twenty-fourth of February.

Ron quite liked the idea of using the Summoning Charm again - Harry had explained about Aqua-Lungs, and Ron couldn't see why Harry shouldn't Summon one from the nearest Muggle town. Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an Aqua-Lung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy - it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an Aqua-Lung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts.

"Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something," Hermione said. "If only we'd done human Transfiguration already! But I don't think we start that until sixth year, and it can go badly wrong if you don't know what you're doing...."

"Yeah, I don't fancy walking around with a periscope sticking out of my head," said Harry. "I s'pose I could always attack someone in front of Moody; he might do it for me...."

"I don't think he'd let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though," said Hermione seriously. "No, I think your best chance is some sort of charm."

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once more among the dusty volumes, looking for any spell that might enable a human to survive without oxygen. However, though he, Ron, and Hermione searched through their lunchtimes, evenings, and whole weekends - though Harry asked Professor McGonagall for a note of permission to use the Restricted Section, and even asked the irritable, vulture-like librarian, Madam Pince, for help - they found nothing whatsoever that would enable Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.

Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class again. The lake, which Harry had always taken for granted as just another feature of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a classroom window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon.

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth (there was still time) . . . there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) . . . three days to go (*please let me find something... please*). . .

With two days left. Harry started to go off food again. The only good thing about breakfast on Monday was the return of the brown owl he had sent to Sirius. He pulled off

the parchment, unrolled it, and saw the shortest letter Sirius had ever written to him.

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hoping to see something else, but it was blank.

"Weekend after next," whispered Hermione, who had read the note over Harry's shoulder. "Here - take my quill and send this owl back straight away."

Harry scribbled the dates down on the back of Sirius's letter, tied it onto the brown owl's leg, and watched it take flight again. What had he expected? Advice on how to survive underwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention the eggs clue.

"What's he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?" said Ron. "Dunno," said Harry dully. The momentary happiness that had flared inside him at the sight of the owl had died. "Come on ...Care of Magical Creatures."

Whether Hagrid was trying to make up for the Blast-Ended Skrewts, or because there were now only two skrewts left, or because he was trying to prove he could do anything that Professor Grubbly-Plank could. Harry didn't know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he'd returned to work. It turned out that Hagrid knew quite as much about unicorns as he did about monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

Today he had managed to capture two unicorn foals. Unlike full-grown unicorns, they were pure gold. Parvati and Lavender went into transports of delight at the sight of them, and even Pansy Parkinson had to work hard to conceal how much she liked them.

"Easier ter spot than the adults," Hagrid told the class. "They turn silver when they're abou' two years old, an' they grow horns at aroun four. Don' go pure white till they're full grown, 'round about seven. They're a bit more trustin when they're babies . . . don mind boys so much.... C'mon, move in a bit, yeh can pat 'em if yeh want. . . give 'em a few o' these sugar lumps. . . ."

"You okay. Harry?" Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorns.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Jus' nervous, eh?" said Hagrid.

"Bit," said Harry.

"Harry," said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry's knees buckled under its weight, "I'd've bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin' yeh set yer mind ter. I'm not worried at all. Yeh're goin ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven' yeh?"

Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn't have any idea how to survive at the bottom of the lake for an hour came over him. He looked up at Hagrid - perhaps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the creatures in it? He looked after everything else on the grounds, after all-

"Yeh're goin' ter win," Hagrid growled, patting Harry's shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches into the soft ground. "I know it. I can feel it. *Yeh're goin' ter win, Harry*"

Harry just couldn't bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid's face. Pretending he was interested in the young unicorns, he forced a smile in return, and

moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task. Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a suitable spell, he'd have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he got to work on the egg's clue sooner? Why had he ever let his mind wander in class - what if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set outside, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells, hidden from one another by the massive piles of books on the desk in front of each of them. Harry's heart gave a huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but more often than not it was merely "Take two pints of water, half a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt..."

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Ron's voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. *Nothing*. Closest was that thing to dry up puddles and ponds, that Drought Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the tiny print of *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes* with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomorrow, right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give back whatever they've nicked, and see if they chuck it out. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, face-down, on *Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts*. "I should've learned to be an Animagus like Sirius."

An Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal.

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted. "It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, now squinting down the index of *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions*. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember... you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office ...what animal you become, and your markings, so you can't abuse it..."

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning...."

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas*. "Who on earth wants to make their nose hair grow into ringlets?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasley's voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just emerged from behind some bookshelves.

"What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for you," said George. "McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you, Hermione."

"Why?" said Hermione, looking surprised.

"Dunno ... she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione off? Perhaps she'd noticed how much they were helping him, when he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

"We'll meet you back in the common room," Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron - both of them looked very anxious. "Bring as many of these books as you can, okay?"

"Right," said Harry uneasily.

By eight o'clock, Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivvy Harry out of the library. Staggering under the weight of as many books as he could carry, Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and continued to search. There was nothing in *Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks*. . . nothing in *A Guide to Medieval Sorcery*. . . not one mention of underwater exploits in *An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms*, or in *Dreadful Denizens of the Deep*, or *Powers You Never Knew You Had and What to Do with Them Now You've Wised Up*.

Crookshanks crawled into Harry's lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry. People kept wishing him luck for the next morning in cheery, confident voices like Hagrid's, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task. Harry couldn't answer them, he just nodded, feeling as though there were a golfball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone in the room with Crookshanks. He had searched all the remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It's over, he told himself. You can't do it. You'll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges....

He imagined himself explaining that he couldn't do the task. He pictured Bagman's look of round-eyed surprise, Karkaroff's satisfied, yellow-toothed smile. He could almost hear Fleur Delacour saying "*I knew it. . . 'e is too young, 'e is only a little boy.*" He saw Malfoy flashing his *POTTER STINKS* badge at the front of the crowd, saw Hagrid's crestfallen, disbelieving face. . . .

Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap, Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on the floor, gave Harry a disgusted look, and stalked away with his bottlebrush tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spiral staircase to his dormitory. . . . He would grab the Invisibility Cloak and go back to the library, he'd stay there all night if he had to. . . .

"*Lumos*," Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books - books of hexes and charms, books on merpeople and water monsters, books on famous witches and wizards, on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one passing reference to underwater survival. He carried them over to a table, then set to work, searching them by the narrow beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. . . .

One in the morning. . . two in the morning . . . the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again, *next book. . . in the next one. . . the next one. . .*

The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laughing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water next to her rock, while she held his Firebolt over his head.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts - get off- ouch -"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me -"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibility Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the side of his face was stuck to the pages of *Where There's a Wand, There's a Way*. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter -"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten - *ten minutes?*"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through Harry's chest into his stomach.

"Hurry, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry's sleeve. "You is supposed to be down by the lake with the other champions, sir!"

"It's too late, Dobby," Harry said hopelessly. "I'm not doing the task, I don't know how-"

"Harry Potter *will* do the task!" squeaked the elf. "Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for him!"

"What?" said Harry. "*But you* don't know what the second task is -"

"Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy -"

"Find my what?"

"- and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!"

"What's a Wheezy?"

"Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy-Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!"

Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

"*What?*" Harry gasped. "They've got. . . they've got *Ron?*"

"The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!" squeaked Dobby. "*But past an hour-*"

"- *'the prospect's black,'*" Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. "*Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.*" Dobby - what've I got to do?"

"You has to eat this, sir!" squeaked the elf, and he put his hand in the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like slimy, grayish-green rat tails. "Right before you go into the lake, sir - gillyweed!"

"What's it do?" said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

"It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!"

"Dobby," said Harry frantically, "listen - are you sure about this?"

He couldn't quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to "help" him, he had ended up with no bones in his right arm.

"Dobby is quite sure, sir!" said the elf earnestly. "Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle as he lights the fires and mops the floors. Dobby heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. . . . Dobby cannot let Harry Potter lose his Wheezy!"

Harry's doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and put it into his pocket, then tore out of the library with Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!" Dobby squealed as they burst into the corridor. "Dobby will be missed - good luck, Harry Potter, sir, good luck!"

"See you later, Dobby!" Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through the double oak doors to watch the second task. They stared as Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the stone steps and out onto the bright, chilly grounds.

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were packed to the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry ran flat-out around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the judges' table, watching Harry sprint toward them.

"I'm . . . here . . ." Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleur's robes.

"Where have you been?" said a bossy, disapproving voice. "The task's about to start!"

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges' table - Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

"Now, now, Percy!" said Ludo Bagman, who was looking intensely relieved to see Harry. "Let him catch his breath!"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn't look at all pleased to see him. . . . It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he wasn't going to turn up.

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife between his ribs, but there was no time to get rid of it; Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Krum, who was wearing swimming trunks and was holding his wand ready.

"All right. Harry?" Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. "Know what you're going to do?"

"Yeah," Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, "*Sonorus!*" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One . . . two . . . *three!*"

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed him down as he walked in deeper; now the water was over his knees, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard and fast as he could; it felt unpleasantly slimy and rubbery, like octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen.

He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stupid, walking into the lake without showing any sign of magical power. The part of him that was still dry was covered in goose pimples; half immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avoided looking at the stands; the laughter was becoming louder, and there were catcalls and jeering from the Slytherins. . . .

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to draw breath, but it made his head spin; his lungs were empty, and he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck -

Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. . . . *He had gills.* Without pausing to think, he did the only thing that made sense - he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp of water and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and ghostly under the water, and they had become webbed. He twisted around and looked at his bare feet - they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too:

It looked as though he had sprouted flippers.

The water didn't feel icy anymore either ... on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. . . . Harry struck out once more, marveling at how far and fast his flipper-like feet propelled him through the water, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to need to blink. He had soon swum so far into the lake that he could no longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around him, so that as he sped through the water new scenes seemed to loom suddenly out of the incoming darkness: forests of rippling, tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones. He swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadow beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him, but when he got nearer, he discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron - nor, thankfully, the giant squid.

Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown grass. Harry was staring unblinkingly ahead of him, trying to discern shapes through the gloom . . . and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long fingers clutched tightly around Harry's leg, its pointed fangs bared - Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, two more grindylows had risen out of the weed, had seized handfuls of Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"*Relashio!*" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. . . . A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, instead of sending sparks at the grindylows, pelted them with what seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry pulled his ankle out of the grindylows grip and swam, as fast as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt one of the grindylows snatch at his foot again, and he kicked out, hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylow floating away, cross-eyed, while its fellows shook their fists at Harry and sank back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full circle in the water, the silence pressing harder than ever against his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

"How are you getting on?"

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of him, gazing at him through her thick, pearly glasses.

"Myrtle!" Harry tried to shout - but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning Myrtle actually giggled.

"You want to try over there!" she said, pointing. "I won't come with you. . . . I don't like them much, they always chase me when I get too close. . . ."

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed to avoid any more grindylows that might be lurking there.

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which swirled murkily as he disturbed the water. Then, at long last, he heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

*"An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took..."*

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like the giant squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

*". . . your time's half gone, so tarry not
Lest what you seek stays here to rot. . . ."*

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Harry saw faces . . . faces that bore no resemblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects' bathroom. . . .

The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them, and he even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to one another. Harry sped around a corner and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson.

Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry feel sure that she was Fleur Delacour's sister. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles kept issuing from their mouths.

Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas - locked in his trunk in the castle a quarter of a mile away, no use to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot-tall merman with a long green beard and a choker of shark fangs and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his head.

"We do not help," he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

"Come *ON!*" Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman, but the merman yanked it back, still shaking his head and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp . . . anything . . .

There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the statue. He began to hack at the ropes binding Ron, and after several minutes' hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little in the ebb of the water.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn't they hurry up? He turned back to Hermione, raised the jagged rock, and began to hack at her bindings too -

At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione, shaking their green-haired heads, and laughing.

"You take your own hostage," one of them said to him. "Leave the others ..."
"No way!" said Harry furiously - but only two large bubbles came out.

Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others ..." *She's* my friend too!" Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from his lips. "And I don't want *them* to die either!"

Cho's head was on Hermiones shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to fight off the mermen, but they laughed harder than ever, holding him back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron to the surface and come back down for Hermione and the others? Would he be able to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left - it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him pointed excitedly over his head. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming toward them. There was an enormous bubble around his head, which made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

"Got lost!" he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her upward and out of sight.

Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages would be lost after an hour. . . .

The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned and saw something monstrous cutting through the water toward them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. ... It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself- but badly.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's new teeth were positioned very awkwardly for biting anything smaller than a dolphin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward. Harry hit Krum hard on the shoulder and held up the jagged stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed Hermione around the waist, and without a backward glance, began to rise rapidly with her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. . . . But still no sign. There was nothing to be done except. . .

He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, shaking their heads at him. Harry pulled out his wand.

"Get out of the way!"

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they suddenly stopped laughing. Their yellowish eyes were fixed upon Harry's wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could tell, by the looks on their faces, that they knew no more magic than the giant squid did.

"You've got until three!" Harry shouted; a great stream of bubbles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they got the message. "One . . ." (he put down a finger) "two . . ." (he put down a second one) -

They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last she was free. He seized the little girl around the waist,

grabbed the neck of Ron's robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but Ron and Fleur's sister were like potato-filled sacks dragging him back down. ... He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was so dark, . . .

Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the water. . . . Would they pull him back down to the depths when the time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry's legs were seizing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders were aching horribly with the effort of dragging Ron and the girl...

He was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again ... he was becoming very aware of how wet the water was in his mouth ... yet the darkness was definitely thinning now... he could see daylight above him.. . .

He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet... water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs ... he was starting to feel dizzy, but he knew light and air were only ten feet above him ... he had to get there ... he had to ...

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop -

And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and, panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet; Harry had the impression they thought that Ron and the little girl might be dead, but they were wrong . . . both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused, but Ron merely expelled a great spout of water, blinked in the bright light, turned to Harry, and said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" Then he spotted Fleur's sister. "What did you bring her for?"

"Fleur didn't turn up, I couldn't leave her," Harry panted.

"Harry, you prat," said Ron, "you didn't take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us drown!"

"The song said -"

"It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!" said Ron. "I hope you didn't waste time down there acting the hero!"

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; *he'd* been asleep, he hadn't felt how eerie it was down in the lake, surrounded by spear-carrying merpeople who'd looked more than capable of murder.

"C'mon," Harry said shortly, "help me with her, I don't think she can swim very well."

They pulled Fleur's sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople accompanying them like a guard of honor, singing their horrible screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum, Cedric, and Cho,

all of whom were wrapped in thick blankets.

Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman stood beaming at Harry and Ron from the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came splashing out to meet them. Meanwhile Madame Maxime was trying to restrain Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

"Gabrielle! *Gabrielle!* Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine!" Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank ("Gerroff, Percy, I'm all right!"); Dumbledore and Bagman were pulling Harry upright; Fleur had broken free of Madame Maxime and was hugging her sister.

"It was ze grindylows . . . zey attacked me ... oh Gabrielle, I thought... I thought..
."

"Come here, you," said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, and forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

"Harry, well done!" Hermione cried. "You did it, you found out how all by yourself!"

"Well -" said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only judge who had not left the table; the only judge not showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur's sister had got back safely. "Yeah, that's right," said Harry, raising his voice slightly so that Karkaroff could hear him.

"You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny," said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing her attention back onto himself; perhaps to remind her that he had just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, "You're well outside the time limit, though, Harry. . . . Did it take you ages to find us?"

"No ... I found you okay...."

Harry's feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledores safety precautions wouldn't have permitted the death of a hostage just because their champion hadn't turned up. Why hadn't he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back.... Cedric and Krum hadn't wasted time worrying about anyone else; they hadn't taken the mersong seriously. ...

Dumbledore was crouching at the water's edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. He was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally he straightened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, "A conference before we give the marks, I think."

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy's clutches; she led him over to Harry and the others, gave him a blanket and some Pepperup Potion, then went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears again), then said to Ron, "And you too-you 'elped -"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit -"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . .

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour." Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. "We therefore award him forty-seven points."

Harry's heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points."

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

"Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect," Bagman continued. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own."

Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks.

"Most of the judges," and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, "feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However . . . Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

Harry's stomach leapt - he was now tying for first place with *Cedric*. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at Harry, then laughed and started applauding hard with the rest of the crowd.

"There you go. Harry!" Ron shouted over the noise. "You weren't being thick after all - you were showing moral fiber!"

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn't look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation again, but she was too busy cheering Harry to listen.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June,"

continued Bagman. "The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions."

It was over. Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes ... it was over, he had got through ... he didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. .

..

Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to buy Dobby a pair of socks for every day of the year.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN – PADFOOT RETURNS

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened down in the lake, which meant that Ron was getting to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's version of events changed subtly with every retelling. At first, he gave what seemed to be the truth; it tallied with Hermione's story, anyway - Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's office, first assuring them that they would be quite safe, and would awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnap in which he struggled single-handedly against fifty heavily armed merpeople who had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

"But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve," he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was getting so much attention and was making a point of talking to him every time they passed in the corridors. "I could've taken those mer-idiots any time I wanted."

"What were you going to do, snore at them?" said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood.

Ron's ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. There were delays in the post because the owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sirius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend turned up at breakfast on Friday morning with half its feathers sticking up the wrong way; Harry had no sooner torn off Sirius's reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be sent outside again.

Sirius's letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Banges) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much food as you can.

"He hasn't come back to Hogsmeade?" said Ron incredulously.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"I can't believe him," said Harry tensely, "if he's caught. . ."

"Made it so far, though, hasn't he?" said Ron. "And it's not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore."

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon - double Potions - feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson's gang of Slytherin girls. All of them were looking at something Harry couldn't see and sniggering heartily. Pansy's pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle's broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached.

"There they are, there they are!" she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hands - *Witch Weekly*. The moving picture on the front showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

"You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!" Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione, who caught it, looking startled. At that moment, the dungeon door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them to write up the ingredients of today's potion on the blackboard, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what they were looking for. Harry and Ron leaned in closer. A color photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:

Harry Potter's Secret Heartache

A boy like no other, perhaps - yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, *writes Rita Skeeter*. Deprived of love since the tragic demise of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that he would shortly be suffering yet another emotional blow in a life already littered with personal loss.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl."

However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest.

"She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, "but she'd be well up to making a Love Potion, she's quite brainy. I think that's how she's doing it."

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime,

Harry Potters well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I *told you* not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some sort of- of scarlet woman!"

Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "*Scarlet woman?*" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles as she looked around at Ron.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Hermione, still giggling, as she threw *Witch Weekly* onto the empty chair beside her. "What a pile of old rubbish."

She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been upset by the article. Hermione gave them a sarcastic smile and a wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scarab beetles. "How could Rita Skeeter have known . . . ?"

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You *haven't* been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. "No, it's just . . . how did she know Viktor asked me to visit him over the summer?"

Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron's eyes.

"What?" said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

"He asked me right after he'd pulled me out of the lake,"

Hermione muttered. "After he'd got rid of his shark's head. Madam Pomfrey gave us both blankets and then he sort of pulled me away from the judges so they wouldn't hear, and he said, if I wasn't doing anything over the summer, would I like to -"

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from his bowl, because he was looking at Hermione.

"And he *did say* he'd never felt the same way about anyone else," Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could almost feel the heat coming from her, "but how could Rita Skeeter have heard him? She wasn't there ... or was she? Maybe she *has* got an Invisibility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto the grounds to watch the second task. ..."

"And what did you say?" Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

"Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to--"

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is. Miss Granger," said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped, "I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy took the opportunity to flash *POTTER STINKS* across the dungeon at Harry.

"Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?" Snape added, snatching up

the copy of *Witch Weekly*. "A further ten points from Gryffindor ... oh but of course ..." Snape's black eyes glittered as they fell on Rita Skeeter's article. "Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. . . ."

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins' laughter, and an unpleasant smile curled Snape's thin mouth. To Harry's fury, he began to read the article aloud.

"*Harry Potter's Secret Heartache*. . . dear, dear. Potter, what's ailing you now? 'A boy like no other, perhaps. . .'"

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. The article sounded ten times worse when read by Snape. Even Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

". . . *Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart upon a worthier candidate.*' How very touching," sneered Snape, rolling up the magazine to continued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. "Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your minds on your potions rather than on your tangled love lives. Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter - that table in front of my desk. Move. Now."

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his cauldron and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the empty table. Snape followed, sat down at his desk and watched Harry unload his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry resumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imagining each one to have Snape's face.

"All this press attention seems to have inflated your already over-large head. Potter," said Snape quietly, once the rest of the class had settled down again.

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for an excuse to take a round fifty points from Gryffindor before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him (Harry continued to pound his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times your picture appears in the papers. To me. Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking slightly out of anger, but he kept his eyes down, as though he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a sorter and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not - if I catch you breaking into my office one more time -"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harry's. "Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them."

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn't stolen either of these things from Snape. Hermione had taken the boomslang skin back in their second year - they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion - and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he had never been able to prove it. Dobby, of course, had stolen the gillyweed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry lied coldly.

"You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!" Snape hissed. "I know it. Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!"

"Right," said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. "I'll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there."

Snape's eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment. Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him - then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

"Do you know what this is. Potter?" Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously again.

"No," said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

"It is Veritaserum - a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear," said Snape viciously. "Now, the use of this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand *slips*" - he shook the crystal bottle slightly - "right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then. Potter . . . then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not."

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again. He didn't like the sound of that Truth Potion at all, nor would he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his mouth if Snape did it... quite apart from landing a whole lot of people in trouble - Hermione and Dobby for a start - there were all the other things he was concealing . . . like the fact that he was in contact with Sirius . . . and - his insides squirmed at the thought - how he felt about Cho. ... He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wondered whether he ought to take a leaf out of Moody's book and start drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

"Enter," said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape's desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

"We need to talk," said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely opening his lips; it was as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff," Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he'd poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape's desk for the rest of the double period. He

seemed intent on preventing Snape from slipping away at the end of class. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

"What's so urgent?" he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

"*This*," said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

"Well?" said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. "Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since - "

"Put it away!" snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

"But you must have noticed -" Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" spat Snape. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor," said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding.

Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was milder than it had been all year, and by the time they arrived in Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had told them to bring was in Harry's bag; they had sneaked a dozen chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks they could find, including a pair patterned with flashing gold and silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at half past one, they made their way up the High Street, past Dervish and Banges, and out toward the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around Hogsmeade. The cottages were fewer here, and their gardens larger; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the lane. Waiting for them, its front paws on the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking very familiar. . . .

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry when they had reached him.

The black dog sniffed Harry's bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and began to trot away from them across the scrubby patch of ground that rose to meet the rocky foot of the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy for him, with his four paws, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were soon out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, winding, and stony path, following

Sirius's wagging tail, sweating in the sun, the shoulder straps of Harry's bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow fissure in the rock. They squeezed into it and found themselves in a cool, dimly lit cave. Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. Half gray horse, half giant eagle, Buckbeak's fierce orange eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperiously for a moment, Buckbeak bent his scaly front knees and allowed Hermione to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into his godfather.

Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was longer than it had been when he had appeared in the fire, and it was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

"Chicken!" he said hoarsely after removing the old *Daily Prophets* from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor.

Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

"Thanks," said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. "I've been living off rats mostly. Can't steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw attention to myself."

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

"What're you doing here, Sirius?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it, I'm pretending to be a lovable stray."

He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry's face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Your last letter . . . well, let's just say things are getting fishier. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who's getting worried."

He nodded at the yellowing *Daily Prophets* on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, continued to stare at Sirius.

"What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

"You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, shrugging, and continuing to devour the chicken leg.

Ron nudged Harry and passed him the *Daily Prophets*. There were two: The first bore the headline *Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch*, the second, *Ministry Witch Still Missing-Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved*.

Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: *hasn't been seen in public since November. . . house appears deserted. . . St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment. . . Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. . .*

"They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here. . . ."

"My brother's Crouch's personal assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork."

"Mind you, he *did* look ill, last time I saw him up close," said Harry slowly, still reading the story. "The night my name came out of the goblet. . . ."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge

to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak, who was crunching up Sirius's chicken bones. "I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now - bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

"Hermione's obsessed with house-elves," Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked interested.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and Winky being found with Harry's wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elf in the Top Box. She was saving Crouch a seat, right?"

"Right," said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy."

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, "Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you'd left the Top Box?"

"Erm . . ." Harry thought hard. "No," he said finally. "I didn't need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put my hand in my pocket, and all that was in there were my Omniculars." He stared at Sirius. "Are you saying whoever conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?"

"It's possible," said Sirius.

"Winky didn't steal that wand!" Hermione insisted.

"The elf wasn't the only one in that box," said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. "Who else was sitting behind you?"

"Loads of people," said Harry. "Some Bulgarian ministers . . . Cornelius Fudge . . . the Malfoys . . ."

"The Malfoys!" said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head nervously. "I bet it was Lucius Malfoy!"

"Anyone else?" said Sirius.

"No one," said Harry.

"Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah . . ."

"I don't know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps," said Sirius, still pacing. "What's he like?"

"He's okay," said Harry. "He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament."

"Does he, now?" said Sirius, frowning more deeply. "I wonder why he'd do that?"

"Says he's taken a liking to me," said Harry.

"Hmm," said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

"We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared," Hermione told Sirius. "Remember?" she said to Harry and Ron.

"Yeah, but he didn't stay in the forest, did he?" said Ron. "The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the campsite."

"How d'you know?" Hermione shot back. "How d'you know where he

Disappeared to?"

"Come off it," said Ron incredulously. "Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?"

"It's more likely he did it than Winky," said Hermione stubbornly.

"Told you," said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, "told you she's obsessed with house -"

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

"When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry's wand, what did Crouch do?"

"Went to look in the bushes," said Harry, "but there wasn't anyone else there."

"Of course," Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, "of course, he'd want to pin it on anyone but his own elf... and then he sacked her?"

"Yes," said Hermione in a heated voice, "he sacked her, just because she hadn't stayed in her tent and let herself get trampled -"

"Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!" said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, "She's got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a mans like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals."

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

"All these absences of Barty Crouch's ... he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn't bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. . . . It's not like Crouch. If he's ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I'll eat Buckbeak."

"D'you know Crouch, then?" said Harry.

Sirius's face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer.

"Oh I know Crouch all right," he said quietly. "He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban - without a trial."

"*What?*" said Ron and Hermione together.

"You're kidding!" said Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. "Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn't you know?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

"He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic," said Sirius. "He's a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical - and power-hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter," he said, reading the look on Harry's face. "No, Barty Crouch was always very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side . . . well, you wouldn't understand . . . you're too young. ..."

"That's what my dad said at the World Cup," said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. "Try us, why don't you?"

A grin flashed across Sirius's thin face.

"All right, I'll try you. . . ." He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, "Imagine that Voldemort's powerful now. You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You're scared for

yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry of Magic's in disarray, they don't know what to do, they're trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that's how it used to be.

"Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning - I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort's supporters. The Aurors were given new powers - powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you - plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened. . . ." Sirius smiled grimly. "Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power."

"Crouch's *son* was caught?" gasped Hermione.

"Yep," said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread, and tearing it in half. "Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while . . . gotten to know his own son."

He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

"*Was* his son a Death Eater?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. "I was in Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters - but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, *just* like the house-elf."

"Did Crouch try and get his son off?" Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

"Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark again - doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn't much more than an excuse for Crouch to show how much he hated the boy . . . then he sent him straight to Azkaban."

"He gave his own son to the dementors?" asked Harry quietly.

"That's right," said Sirius, and he didn't look remotely amused now. "I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them through the bars in my cell door. He can't have been more than nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though . . . they all went quiet in the end. . . except when they shrieked in their sleep. . . ."

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

"So he's still in Azkaban?" Harry said.

"No," said Sirius dully. "No, he's not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in."

"He *died*?"

"He wasn't the only one," said Sirius bitterly. "Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry member, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his son's body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it."

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drained it.

"So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic...next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I've heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch's eyes had bulged as he'd looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

"Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards," Harry told Sirius.

"Yeah, I've heard it's become a bit of a mania with him," said Sirius, nodding. "If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater."

"And he sneaked up here to search Snape's office!" said Ron triumphantly, looking at Hermione.

"Yes, and that doesn't make sense at all," said Sirius.

"Yeah, it does!" said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

"Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn't he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal excuse to make regular visits to Hogwarts and keep an eye on him."

"So you think Snape could be up to something, then?" asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

"Look, I don't care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape -"

"Oh give it a rest, Hermione," said Ron impatiently. "I know Dumbledores brilliant and everything, but that doesn't mean a really clever Dark wizard couldn't fool him -"

"Why did Snape save Harry's life in the first year, then? Why didn't he just let him die?"

"I dunno - maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out-"

"What d'you think, Sirius?" Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

"I think they've both got a point," said Sirius, looking thoughtfully at Ron and Hermione. "Ever since I found out Snape was teaching here, I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape's always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was," Sirius added, and Harry and Ron grinned at each other. "Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters."

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

"Rosier and Wilkes - they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges - they're a married couple - they're in Azkaban. Avery - from what I've heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he'd been acting under the Imperius Curse - he's still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater - not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape's certainly clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble."

"Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet," said Ron.

"Yeah, you should've seen Snape's face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!" said Harry quickly. "Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, he says Snape's been avoiding him. Karkaroff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, then shrugged again. "Well, I've no idea what that's about. . . but if Karkaroff's genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers ..."

Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

"There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn't, but I just can't see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he'd ever worked for Voldemort."

"Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snapes office then?" said Ron stubbornly.

"Well," said Sirius slowly, "I wouldn't put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher's office when he got to Hogwarts. He takes his Defense Against the Dark Arts seriously, Moody. I'm not sure *he* trusts anyone at all, and after the things he's seen, it's not surprising. I'll say this for Moody, though, he never killed if he could help it. Always brought people in alive where possible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, though . . . he's a different matter ... is he really ill? If he is, why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape's office? And if he's not. . . what's he up to? What was he doing at the World Cup that was so important he didn't turn up in the Top Box? What's he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?"

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for bones he might have overlooked. Finally, Sirius

looked up at Ron.

"You say your brother's Crouch's personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he's seen Crouch lately?"

"I can try," said Ron doubtfully. "Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy loves Crouch."

"And you might try and find out whether they've got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you're at it," said Sirius, gesturing to the second copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Bagman told me they hadn't," said Harry.

"Yes, he's quoted in the article in there," said Sirius, nodding at the paper.

"Blustering on about how bad Bertha's memory is. Well, maybe she's changed since I knew her, but the Bertha I knew wasn't forgetful at all - quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. It used to get her into a lot of trouble; she never knew when to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic . . . maybe that's why Bagman didn't bother to look for her for so long. . . ."

Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

"What's the time?"

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn't been working since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

"It's half past three," said Hermione.

"You'd better get back to school," Sirius said, getting to his feet. "Now listen . . ." He looked particularly hard at Harry. "I don't want you lot sneaking out of school to see me, all right? Just send notes to me here. I still want to hear about anything odd. But you're not to go leaving Hogwarts without permission; it would be an ideal opportunity for someone to attack you."

"No one's tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows," Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

"I don't care . . . I'll breathe freely again when this tournament's over, and that's not until June. And don't forget, if you're talking about me among yourselves, call me Snuffles, okay?"

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak good-bye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village with you," said Sirius, "see if I can scrounge another paper."

He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with him, across the boulder-strewn ground, and back to the stile. Here he allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back into Hogsmeade and up toward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't care . . . It'd probably just make him admire Crouch even more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

"I don't know," said Ron. "If he thought we were standing in the way of his career . . . Percy's really ambitious, you know. . . ."

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the Great Hall.

"Poor old Snuffles," said Ron, breathing deeply. "He must really like you. Harry. . . . Imagine having to live off rats."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – THE MADNESS OF MR CROUCH

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, whether he had seen Mr. Crouch lately. They used Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the Owlery window, they proceeded down to the kitchen to give Dobby his new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was ecstatic about his present.

"Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

"You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did," said Harry.

"No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?" said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

"You've just had breakfast!" said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them, supported by four elves.

"We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles," Harry muttered.

"Good idea," said Ron. "Give Pig something to do. You couldn't give us a bit of extra food, could you?" he said to the surrounding elves, and they bowed delightedly and hurried off to get some more.

"Dobby, where's Winky?" said Hermione, who was looking around.

"Winky is over there by the fire, miss," said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

"Oh dear," said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to become so filthy that she was not immediately distinguishable from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of butterbeer and swaying slightly on her stool, staring into the fire. As they watched her, she gave an enormous hiccup.

"Winky is getting through six bottles a day now," Dobby whispered to Harry.

"Well, it's not strong, that stuff," Harry said.

But Dobby shook his head. "'Tis strong for a house-elf, sir," he said.

Winky hiccuped again. The elves who had brought the eclairs gave her disapproving looks as they returned to work.

"Winky is pining, Harry Potter," Dobby whispered sadly. "Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, sir, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Professor Dumbledore is her master now."

"Hey, Winky," said Harry, struck by a sudden inspiration, walking over to her, and bending down, "you don't know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he's stopped turning up to judge the Triwizard Tournament."

Winky's eyes flickered. Her enormous pupils focused on Harry. She swayed slightly again and then said, "M - Master is stopped - *hic* - coming?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "we haven't seen him since the first task. The *Daily Prophet's* saying he's ill."

Winky swayed some more, staring blurrily at Harry.

"Master- *hic*- ill?"

Her bottom lip began to tremble.

"But we're not sure if that's true," said Hermione quickly.

"Master is needing his - *hie* - Winky!" whimpered the elf. "Master cannot - *hic* - manage - *hic* - all by himself. . . ."

"Other people manage to do their own housework, you know, Winky," Hermione said severely.

"Winky - *hic* - is not only - *hic* - doing housework for Mr. Crouch!" Winky squeaked indignantly, swaying worse than ever and slopping butterbeer down her already heavily stained blouse. "Master is - *hic* - trusting Winky with - *hic* - the most important - *hic* - the most secret. . ."

"What?" said Harry.

But Winky shook her head very hard, spilling more butterbeer down herself.

"Winky keeps - *hic* - her master's secrets," she said mutinously, swaying very heavily now, frowning up at Harry with her eyes crossed. "You is - *hic* - nosing, you is."

"Winky must not talk like that to Harry Potter!" said Dobby angrily. "Harry Potter is brave and noble and Harry Potter is not nosy!"

"He is nosing - *hic* - into my master's - *hic* - private and secret - *hic* - Winky is a good house-elf- *hic* - Winky keeps her silence - *hic* - people trying to - *hic* - pry and poke - *hic* -"

Winky's eyelids drooped and suddenly, without warning, she slid off her stool into the hearth, snoring loudly. The empty bottle of butterbeer rolled away across the stone-flagged floor. Half a dozen house-elves came hurrying forward, looking disgusted. One of them picked up the bottle; the others covered Winky with a large checked tablecloth and tucked the ends in neatly, hiding her from view.

"We is sorry you had to see that, sirs and miss!" squeaked a nearby elf, shaking his head and looking very ashamed. "We is hoping you will not judge us all by Winky, sirs and miss!"

"She's unhappy!" said Hermione, exasperated. "Why don't you try and cheer her up instead of covering her up?"

"Begging your pardon, miss," said the house-elf, bowing deeply again, "but house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served."

"Oh for heavens sake!" Hermione cried. "Listen to me, all of you! You've got just as much right as wizards to be unhappy! You've got the right to wages and holidays and proper clothes, you don't have to do everything you're told - look at Dobby!"

"Miss will please keep Dobby out of this," Dobby mumbled, looking scared. The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she were mad and dangerous.

"We has your extra food!" squeaked an elf at Harry's elbow, and he shoved a large ham, a dozen cakes, and some fruit into Harry's arms. "Good-bye!"

The house-elves crowded around Harry, Ron, and Hermione and began shunting them out of the kitchen, many little hands pushing in the smalls of their backs.

"Thank you for the socks, Harry Potter!" Dobby called miserably from the hearth, where he was standing next to the lumpy tablecloth that was Winky.

"You couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you, Hermione?" said Ron angrily as the kitchen door slammed shut behind them. "They won't want us visiting them now! We could've tried to get more stuff out of Winky about Crouch!"

"Oh as if you care about that!" scoffed Hermione. "You only like coming down here for the food!"

It was an irritable sort of day after that. Harry got so tired of Ron and Hermione sniping at each other over their homework in the common room that he took Sirius's food up to the Owlery that evening on his own.

Pigwidgeon was much too small to carry an entire ham up to the mountain by himself, so Harry enlisted the help of two school screech owls as well. When they had set off into the dusk, looking extremely odd carrying the large package between them. Harry leaned on the windowsill, looking out at the grounds, at the dark, rustling treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the rippling sails of the Durmstrang ship. An eagle owl flew through the coil of smoke rising from Hagrid's chimney; it soared toward the castle, around the Owlery, and out of sight. Looking down, Harry saw Hagrid digging energetically in front of his cabin. Harry wondered what he was doing; it looked as though he were making a new vegetable patch. As he watched, Madame Maxime emerged from the Beauxbatons carriage and walked over to Hagrid. She appeared to be trying to engage him in conversation. Hagrid leaned upon his spade, but did not seem keen to prolong their talk, because Madame Maxime returned to the carriage shortly afterward.

Unwilling to go back to Gryffindor Tower and listen to Ron and Hermione snarling at each other, Harry watched Hagrid digging until the darkness swallowed him and the owls around Harry began to awake, swooshing past him into the night.

By breakfast the next day Ron's and Hermione's bad moods had burnt out, and to Harry's relief, Ron's dark predictions that the house-elves would send substandard food up to the Gryffindor table because Hermione had insulted them proved false; the bacon, eggs, and kippers were quite as good as usual.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione looked up eagerly; she seemed to be expecting something.

"Percy won't've had time to answer yet," said Ron. "We only sent Hedwig yesterday."

"No, it's not that," said Hermione. "I've taken out a subscription to the *Daily Prophet*. I'm getting sick of finding everything out from the Slytherins."

"Good thinking!" said Harry, also looking up at the owls. "Hey, Hermione, I think you're in luck -"

A gray owl was soaring down toward Hermione.

"It hasn't got a newspaper, though," she said, looking disappointed. "It's -" But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, and a tawny.

"How many subscriptions did you take out?" said Harry, seizing Hermione's goblet before it was knocked over by the cluster of owls, all of whom were jostling close to her, trying to deliver their own letter first.

"What on earth - ?" Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. "Oh really!" she sputtered, going rather red.

"What's up?" said Ron.

"It's - oh how ridiculous -"

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwritten, but composed from pasted letters that seemed to have been cut out of the *Daily Prophet*.

YOU ARE A WICKED GIRL. HARRY POTTER DESERVES
BETTER. GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM MUGGLE.

"They're all like it!" said Hermione desperately, opening one letter after another. "*Harry Potter can do much better than the likes of you. . . . 'You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn. . . . ' Ouch!*"

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which began to erupt in large yellow boils.

"Undiluted bubotuber pus!" said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

"Ow!" said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers were now so thickly covered in painful sores that it looked as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

"You'd better get up to the hospital wing," said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. "We'll tell Professor Sprout where you've gone. . . ."

"I warned her!" said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. "I warned her not to annoy Rita Skeeter! Look at this one ..." He read out one of the letters Hermione had left behind: "*I read In Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has had enough hardship and I will be sending you a curse by next post as soon as I can find a big enough envelope.*" Blimey, she'd better watch out for herself."

Hermione didn't turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures class, they saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle descending the stone steps of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sight of Harry, Pansy called, "Potter, have you split up with your girlfriend? Why was she so upset at breakfast?"

Harry ignored her; he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the *Witch Weekly* article had caused.

Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin with a fresh supply of open crates at his feet. Harry's heart sank at the sight of the crates - surely not another skrewt hatching? - but when he got near enough to see inside, he found himself looking at a number of flurry black creatures with long snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely puzzled at all the attention.

"These're niffers," said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. "Yeh find 'em down mines mostly. They like sparkly stuff. . . . There yeh go, look."

One of the niffers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson's watch off her wrist. She shrieked and jumped backward.

"Useful little treasure detectors," said Hagrid happily. "Thought we'd have some

fun with 'em today. See over there?" He pointed at the large patch of freshly turned earth Harry had watched him digging from the Owlery window. "I've buried some gold coins. I've got a prize fer whoever picks the niffler that digs up most. Jus' take off all yer valuables, an' choose a niffler, an get ready ter set 'em loose."

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up a niffler. It put its long snout in Harry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here . . . who's missin? Where's Hermione?"

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening.

It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch of earth as though it were water, each scurrying back to the student who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap with coins.

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn' be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the lot, now," he added, pacing around the patch of earth while the nifflers continued to dive. "I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserable. Pansy Parkinson was watching her beadily.

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he added, his beetle-black eyes narrowed. "It's leprechaun gold. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hagrid gave him an enormous slab of Honeydukes chocolate for a prize. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the castle, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione stayed behind to help Hagrid put the nifflers back in their boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out other carriage window.

"What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?" said Hagrid, looking concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

"Aaah, don worry," said Hagrid gendy, looking down at her. "I got some o' those letters an all, after Rita Skeeter wrote abou me mum. '*Yeh're a monster an yeh should be put down.*' '*Yer mother killed innocent people an if you had any decency you d jump in a lake.*'"

"No!" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall. "They're jus' nutters, Hermione. Don' open 'em if yeh get any more. Chuck 'em straigh' in the fire."

"You missed a really good lesson," Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. "They're good, nifflers, aren't they, Ron?"

Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked

thoroughly put out about something.

"What's the matter?" said Harry. "Wrong flavor?"

"No," said Ron shortly. "Why didn't you tell me about the gold?"

"What gold?" said Harry.

"The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup," said Ron. "The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omnioculars. In the Top Box. Why didn't you tell me it disappeared?"

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

"Oh . . ." he said, the memory coming back to him at last. "I dunno ... I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried about my wand, wasn't I?"

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

"Must be nice," Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. "To have so much money you don't notice if a pocketful of Galleons goes missing."

"Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!" said Harry impatiently. "We all did, remember?"

"I didn't know leprechaun gold vanishes," Ron muttered. "I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn't've given me that Chudley Cannon hat for Christmas."

"Forget it, all right?" said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, "I hate being poor."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them really knew what to say.

"It's rubbish," said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. "I don't blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. Wish I could. Wish I had a niffler."

"Well, we know what to get you next Christmas," said Hermione brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she said, "Come on, Ron, it could be worse. At least your fingers aren't full of pus." Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork, her fingers were so stiff and swollen. "I *hate* that Skeeter woman!" she burst out savagely. "I'll get her back for this if it's the last thing I do!"

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid's advice and stopped opening it, several of her ill-wishers sent Howlers, which exploded at the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn't read *Witch Weekly* knew all about the supposed Harry-Krum-Hermione triangle now. Harry was getting sick of telling people that Hermione wasn't his girlfriend.

"It'll die down, though," he told Hermione, "if we just ignore it. ... People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me last time

"I want to know how she's listening into private conversations when she's supposed to be banned from the grounds!" said Hermione angrily.

Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was very eager to leave; Moody had given them such a rigorous test of hex-deflection that many of them were nursing small injuries. Harry had such a bad case of Twitchy Ears, he had to hold his hands clamped

over them as he walked away from the class.

"Well, Rita's definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!" Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron in the entrance hall and pulling Harry's hand away from one of his wiggling ears so that he could hear her. "Moody says he didn't see her anywhere near the judges' table at the second task, or anywhere near the lake!"

"Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?" said Ron.

"No!" said Hermione stubbornly. "I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! *And* how she found out about Hagrid's mum!"

"Maybe she had you bugged," said Harry.

"Bugged?" said Ron blankly. "What. . . put fleas on her or something?"

Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and recording equipment. Ron was fascinated, but Hermione interrupted them.

"Aren't you two *ever* going to read *Hogwarts, A History*?"

"What's the point?" said Ron. "You know it by heart, we can just ask you."

"All those substitutes for magic Muggles use - electricity, computers, and radar, and all those things - they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there's too much magic in the air. No, Rita's using magic to eavesdrop, she must be. . . If I could just find out what it is . . . ooh, if it's illegal, I'll have her . . ."

"Haven't we got enough to worry about?" Ron asked her. "Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?"

"I'm not asking you to help!" Hermione snapped. "I'll do it on my own!"

She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

"What's the betting she comes back with a box of / *Hate Rita Skeeter* badges?" said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pursue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were both grateful, because their workload was mounting ever higher in the days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods of eavesdropping as well as everything else they had to do. He was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages up to the cave in the mountain for Sirius; after last summer, Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that they were still waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn't return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy's letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that Mrs. Weasley had sent. Both Harry's and Ron's were the size of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermione's, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she saw it.

"Your mum doesn't read *Witch Weekly*, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. "Gets it for the recipes."

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

"Don't you want to see what Percy's written?" Harry asked her hastily.

Percy's letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls with instructions. No, I haven't actually seen him, but I think I can be trusted to know my own superior's handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to quash these ridiculous rumors. Please don't bother me again unless it's something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn't know what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall held him back in Transfiguration.

"You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock. Potter," she told him. "Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task."

So at half past eight that night. Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the entrance hall, Cedric came up from the Hufflepuff common room.

"What d'you reckon it's going to be?" he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. "Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we've got to find treasure."

"That wouldn't be too bad," said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niffler to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field.

"What've they done to it?" Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

"They're hedges!" said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. Fleur beamed at Harry as he came nearer. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

"Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high. Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry's and Cedric's faces, "you'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then -

"Maze," grunted Krum.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We seemly 'ave to get through the maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Hagrid is providing a number of creatures . . . then there will be spells that must be broken ... all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze." Bagman grinned at Harry and Cedric. "Then Mr. Krum will enter . . . then Miss Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

"Very well. . . if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly. ..."

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but just then, Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Could I haff a vord?"

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, slightly surprised.

"Vill you valk vith me?"

"Okay," said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

"I'll wait for you. Harry, shall I?"

"No, it's okay, Mr. Bagman," said Harry, suppressing a smile, "I think I can find the castle on my own, thanks."

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the forest.

"What're we going this way for?" said Harry as they passed Hagrid's cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

"Don't vont to be overheard," said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses' paddock, Krum stopped in the shade of the trees and turned to face Harry.

"I vant to know," he said, glowering, "vot there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny."

Harry, who from Krum's secretive manner had expected something much more serious than this, stared up at Krum in amazement.

"Nothing," he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. "We're friends. She's not my girlfriend and she never has been. It's just that Skeeter woman making things up."

"Hermy-own-ninny talks about you very often," said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "because were *friends*."

He couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. It was as though the eighteen-year-old Krum thought he, Harry, was an equal - a real rival -

"You haff never . . . you haff not..."

"No," said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few seconds, then said, "You fly very veil. I vos votching at the first task."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. "I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint, you really -"

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the forest, instinctively grabbed Krum's arm and pulled him around.

"Vot is it?"

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he'd seen movement. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand.

Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn't recognize him . . . then he realized it was Mr. Crouch.

He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

"Vosn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he vith your Ministry?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree.

"... and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve. . . ."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

"... and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen ... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will..."

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm.

"Vot is wrong with him?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "Listen, you'd better go and get someone -"

"Dumbledore!" gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry's robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry's head. "I need... see ... Dumbledore. ..."

"Okay," said Harry, "if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the-"

"I've done . . . stupid . . . thing . . ." Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. "Must. . . tell. . . Dumbledore . . ."

"Get up, Mr. Crouch," said Harry loudly and clearly. "Get up, I'll take you to

Dumbledore!"

Mr. Crouch's eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

"Who ... you?" he whispered.

"I'm a student at the school," said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking extremely nervous.

"You're not... *his*?" whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

"No," said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

"Dumbledore's?"

"That's right," said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch's grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

"Warn ... Dumbledore ..."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him... ."

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge."

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he didn't notice that Crouch had released him.

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.S, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response. ..."

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumbledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is -"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't. . . leave . . . me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I... escaped . . . must warn . . . must tell... see Dumbledore . . . my fault... all my fault. . . Bertha . . . dead ... all my fault. . . my son ... my fault... tell Dumbledore ... Harry Potter ... the Dark Lord . . . stronger . . . Harry Potter ..."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. "I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, von't you?" Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. They were deserted; Bagman, Cedric, and Fleur had disappeared. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

"Sher - sherbet lemon!" he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore's office - or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

"Move!" Harry shouted at it. "C'mon!"

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the dark corridor. Perhaps Dumbledore was in the staffroom? He started running as fast as he could toward the staircase -

"POTTER!"

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him even as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape instead. "It's Mr. Crouch . . . he's just turned up ... he's in the forest... he's asking -"

"What is this rubbish?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch!" Harry shouted. "From the Ministry! He's ill or something - he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to -"

"The headmaster is busy. Potter," said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

"I've got to tell Dumbledore!" Harry yelled.

"Didn't you hear me. Potter?"

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

"Look," said Harry angrily, "Crouch isn't right - he's - he's out of his mind - he says he wants to warn -"

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was standing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression. "Is there a problem?" he said, looking between Harry and Snape.

"Professor!" Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak, "Mr. Crouch is here - he's down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!"

Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

"Lead the way," he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to the gargoyle and looking twice as ugly.

"What did Mr. Crouch say. Harry?" said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

"Said he wants to warn you . . . said he's done something terrible ... he mentioned his son . . . and Bertha Jorkins . . . and - and Voldemort. . . something about Voldemort getting stronger. ..."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

"He's not acting normally," Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. "He

doesn't seem to know where he is. He keeps talking like he thinks Percy Weasley's there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you. ... I left him with Viktor Krum."

"You did?" said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up. "Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Harry. "Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed behind, and then we saw Mr. Crouch coming out of the forest -"

"Where are they?" said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

"Over here," said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He couldn't hear Crouch's voice anymore, but he knew where he was going; it hadn't been much past the Beauxbatons carriage . . . somewhere around here. . . .

"Viktor?" Harry shouted.

No one answered.

"They were here," Harry said to Dumbledore. "They were definitely somewhere around here. ..."

"*Lumos*," Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up.

Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illuminating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. There was no sign at all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over Krum and gently lifted one of his eyelids.

"Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

"Should I go and get someone?" said Harry. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," said Dumbledore swiftly. "Stay here."

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Then Dumbledore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and muttered, "*Ennervate*."

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and made him lie still.

"He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I was looking around to see where Potter had gone and he attacked from behind!"

"Lie still for a moment," Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was carrying his crossbow.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry - what the - ?"

"Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff," said Dumbledore. "His student has been attacked. When you've done that, kindly alert Professor Moody -"

"No need, Dumbledore," said a wheezy growl. "I'm here."

Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit.

"Damn leg," he said furiously. "Would've been here quicker . . . what's happened? Snape said something about Crouch -"

"Crouch?" said Hagrid blankly.

"Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!" said Dumbledore sharply.

"Oh yeah . . . right y'are, Professor. . ." said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him.

"I don't know where Barty Crouch is," Dumbledore told Moody, "but it is essential that we find him."

"I'm onto it," growled Moody, and he pulled out his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Karkaroff was hurrying along behind them. He was wearing his sleek silver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

"What is this?" he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. "What's going on?"

"I vos attacked!" said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. "Mr. Crouch or votever his name -"

"Crouch attacked you? *Crouch* attacked you? The Triwizard judge?"

"Igor," Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

"Treachery!" he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put *my* champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences - here's what I think of *you!*"

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree.

"Apologize!" Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

"Hagrid, *no!*" Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

"Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

"Maybe I'd better stay here. Headmaster. . . ."

"You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid," Dumbledore repeated firmly.

"Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. And Harry - I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do - any owls you might want to send - they can wait until morning, do you understand me?"

"Er - yes," said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking about sending Pigwidgeon straight to Sirius, to tell him what had happened?

"I'll leave Fang with yeh. Headmaster," Hagrid said, staring menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the tree, tangled in furs and tree roots.

"Stay, Fang. C'mon, Harry."

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

"How dare he," Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. "How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore'd do anythin' like that. Like Dumbledore wanted *you* in the tournament in the firs' place. Worried! I dunno when I seen Dumbledore more worried than he's bin lately. An' you!" Hagrid suddenly said angrily to Harry, who looked up at him, taken aback. "What were yeh doin', wanderin' off with ruddy Krum? He's from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn't he? Hasn't Moody taught yeh nothin'? 'Magine lettin' him lure yeh off on yer own -"

"Krum's all right!" said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall.

"He wasn't trying to jinx me, he just wanted to talk about Hermione -"

"I'll be havin' a few words with her, an' all," said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. "The less you lot 'ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh'll be. Yeh can trust any of 'em."

"You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime," Harry said, annoyed.

"Don' you talk ter me abou' her!" said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. "I've got her number now! Tryin' ter get back in me good books, tryin' ter get me ter tell her what's comin' in the third task. Ha! You can't trust any of 'em!"

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered through the portrait hole into the common room and hurried straight for the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – THE DREAM

It comes down to this," said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. "Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else attacked both of them when Viktor wasn't looking."

"It must've been Crouch," said Ron at once. "That's why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He'd done a runner."

"I don't think so," said Harry, shaking his head. "He seemed really weak - I don't reckon he was up to Disapparating or anything."

"You *cant* Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven't I told you enough times?" said Hermione.

"Okay. . . hows this for a theory," said Ron excitedly. "Krum attacked Crouch - no, wait for it - and then Stunned himself!"

"And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?" said Hermione coldly.

"Oh yeah . . ."

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery together to send a note to Sirius. Now they were standing looking out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night about Mr. Crouch.

"Just go through it again, Harry," said Hermione. "What did Mr. Crouch actually say?"

"I've told you, he wasn't making much sense," said Harry. "He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He definitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. . . . He mentioned his

son."

"Well, that *was* his fault," said Hermione testily.

"He was out of his mind," said Harry. "Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking to Percy about work and giving him instructions."

"And . . . remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?" said Ron tentatively.

"I've told you," Harry repeated dully. "He said he's getting stronger."

There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, "But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was probably just raving. ..."

"He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort," said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. "He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but that was when he seemed to know where he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore."

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then, another owl would swoop in through one of the windows, returning from its night's hunting with a mouse in its beak.

"If Snape hadn't held me up," Harry said bitterly, "we might've got there in time. The headmaster is busy. Potter . . . what's this rubbish, Potter? Why couldn't he have just got out of the way?"

"Maybe he didn't want you to get there!" said Ron quickly. "Maybe - hang on - how fast d'you reckon he could've gotten down to the forest? D'you reckon he could've beaten you and Dumbledore there?"

"Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something," said Harry.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Ron muttered.

"We need to see Professor Moody," said Hermione. "We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch,"

"If he had the Marauder's Map on him, it would've been easy," said Harry.

"Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds," said Ron, "because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn't -"

"Shh!" said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

"- that's blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that-"

"- we've tried being polite; it's time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn't like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did -"

"I'm telling you, if you put that in writing, it's blackmail!"

"Yeah, and you won't be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?"

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What're you doing here?" Ron and Fred said at the same time.

"Sending a letter," said Harry and George in unison.

"What, at this time?" said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

"Fine - we won't ask you what you're doing, if you don't ask us," he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shifted his hand so that the name on it was covered.

"Well, don't let us hold you up," Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn't move. "Who're you blackmailing?" he said.

The grin vanished from Fred's face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

"Don't be stupid, I was only joking," he said easily.

"Didn't sound like that," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, "I've told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can't see why you would, but -"

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," said Ron. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for that."

"Told you, I was joking," said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to the leg of the nearest barn owl. "You're starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made a prefect."

"No, I won't!" said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took *off*. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later."

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

"You don't think they know something about all this, do you?" Hermione whispered. "About Crouch and everything?"

"No," said Harry. "If it was something that serious, they'd tell someone. They'd tell Dumbledore."

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked him.

"Well. . ." said Ron slowly, "I dunno if they would. They're . . . they're obsessed with making money lately, I noticed it when I was hanging around with them - when - you know -"

"We weren't talking." Harry finished the sentence for him. "Yeah, but blackmail..."

"It's this joke shop idea they've got," said Ron. "I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it, they want to start one. They've only got a year left at Hogwarts, they keep going on about how it's time to think about their future, and Dad can't help them, and they need gold to get started."

Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

"Yes, but. . . they wouldn't do anything against the law to get gold."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ron, looking skeptical. "I dunno . . . they don't exactly mind breaking rules, do they?"

"Yes, but this is the *law*" said Hermione, looking scared. "This isn't some silly school rule. . . . They'll get a lot more than detention for blackmail! Ron. . . maybe you'd better tell Percy. . . ."

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "Tell Percy? He'd probably do a Crouch and turn them in." He stared at the window through which Fred and George's owl had departed, then said, "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"D'you think it's too early to go and see Professor Moody?" Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

"Yes," said Harry. "He'd probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he'll think we're trying to attack him while he's asleep. Let's give it till break."

History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron's watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron's was moving so slowly he could have sworn it had stopped working too. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione wasn't taking her usual notes, but was sitting with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody leaving it. He looked as tired as they felt. The eyelid of his normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

"Professor Moody?" Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

"Hello, Potter," growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous; it rolled into the back of Moody's head and watched them around the corner before he spoke again.

"Come in here."

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

"Did you find him?" Harry asked without preamble. "Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out his hip flask.

"Did you use the map?" Harry said.

"Of course," said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. "Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office into the forest. He wasn't anywhere on there."

"So he *did* Disapparate?" said Ron.

"*You can't Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!*" said Hermione. "There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren't there, Professor?"

Moody's magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. "You're another one who might think about a career as an Auror," he told her. "Mind works the right way. Granger."

Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

"Well, he wasn't invisible," said Harry. "The map shows invisible people. He must've left the grounds, then."

"But under his own steam?" said Hermione eagerly, "or because someone made him?"

"Yeah, someone could've - could've pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn't they?" said Ron quickly, looking hopefully at Moody as if he too wanted to be told he had the makings of an Auror.

"We can't rule out kidnap," growled Moody.

"So," said Ron, "d'you reckon he's somewhere in Hogsmeade?"

"Could be anywhere," said Moody, shaking his head. "Only thing we know for sure is that he's not here."

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he said, "Now, Dumbledore's told me you three fancy yourselves as investigators, but there's nothing you can do for Crouch. The Ministry'll be looking for him now, Dumbledore's notified them. Potter, you just keep your mind on the third task."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh yeah . . ."

He hadn't given the maze a single thought since he'd left it with Krum the previous night.

"Should be right up your street, this one," said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. "From what Dumbledore's said, you've managed to get through stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles guarding the Sorcerer's Stone in your first year, didn't you?"

"We helped," Ron said quickly. "Me and Hermione helped."

Moody grinned.

"Well, help him practice for this one, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't win," said Moody. "In the meantime . . . constant vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance." He took another long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible through it.

"You two," counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, "you stick close to Potter, all right? I'm keeping an eye on things, but all the same . . . you can never have too many eyes out."

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl landed in front of Hermione, clutching a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, "Ha! She hasn't got wind of Crouch!" then joined Ron and Harry in reading what Sirius had to say on the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry - what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by return owl, that you are not going to go walking with anyone else at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing Dumbledore and you were probably feet away from them in the dark. You could have been killed.

Your name didn't get into the Goblet of Fire by accident. If someone's trying to attack you, they're on their last chance. Stay close to Ron and Hermione, do not leave Gryffindor Tower after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stunning and Disarming. A few hexes wouldn't go amiss either. There's nothing you can do about Crouch. Keep your head down and look after yourself. I'm waiting for your letter giving me your word you won't stray out-of-bounds again.

Sirius

"Who's he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?" said Harry in mild

indignation as he folded up Sirius's letter and put it inside his robes. "After all the stuff he did at school!"

"He's worried about you!" said Hermione sharply. "Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!"

"No one's tried to attack me all year," said Harry. "No one's done anything to me at all--"

"Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire," said Hermione. "And they must've done that for a reason. Harry. Snuffles is right. Maybe they've been biding their time. Maybe this is the task they're going to get you."

"Look," said Harry impatiently, "let's say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they *would've* been in the trees near us, wouldn't they? But they waited till I was out of the way until they acted, didn't they? So it doesn't look like I'm their target, does it?"

"They couldn't have made it look like an accident if they'd murdered you in the forest!" said Hermione. "But if you die during a task--"

"They didn't care about attacking Krum, did they?" said Harry. "Why didn't they just polish me off at the same time? They could've made it look like Krum and I had a duel or something."

"Harry, I don't understand it either," said Hermione desperately. "I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and I don't like it. ... Moody's right - Sirius is right - you've got to get in training for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise him you're not going to go sneaking off alone again."

The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent all of his free time either in the library with Hermione and Ron, looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the Stunning Spell, which he had never used before. The trouble was that practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron's and Hermione's part.

"Can't we kidnap Mrs. Norris?" Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their Charms classroom, having just been Stunned and reawoken by Harry for the fifth time in a row. "Let's Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he'd do anything to help you. I'm not complaining or anything" - he got gingerly to his feet, rubbing his backside - "but I'm aching all over. ..."

"Well, you keep missing the cushions, don't you!" said Hermione impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the Banishing Spell, which Flitwick had left in a cabinet. "Just try and fall backward!"

"Once you're Stunned, you can't aim too well, Hermione!" said Ron angrily. "Why don't you take a turn?"

"Well, I think Harry's got it now, anyway," said Hermione hastily. "And we don't have to worry about Disarming, because he's been able to do that for ages. ... I think we ought to start on some of these hexes this evening."

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

"I like the look of this one," she said, "this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that's trying to attack you. Harry. We'll start with that one."

The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwicks cupboard and slipped out of the classroom.

"See you at dinner!" said Hermione, and she set off for Arithmancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower, and Divination. Broad strips of dazzling gold sunlight tell across the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

"It's going to be boiling in Trelawney's room, she never puts out that fire," said Ron as they started up the staircase toward the silver ladder and the trapdoor.

He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than ever. Harry's head swam as he made his way over to one of the curtained windows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling her shawl from a lamp, he opened it an inch or so and settled back in his chintz armchair, so that a soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable.

"My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all with her strangely enlarged eyes, "we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights. . . ."

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over him, and the breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently somewhere behind the curtain. His eyelids began to droop. . . .

He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hillside. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Harry's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end . . . through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up... Harry had left the owl's back... he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to him. . . . There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair . . . both of them were stirring. . . .

One was a huge snake . . . the other was a man ... a short, balding man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose ... he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearth rug. . . .

"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am ... I am so pleased . . . and so sorry. ..."

"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all... but never mind, never mind . . . there is still Harry Potter. ..."

The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.

"Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you. ..."

"My Lord ... no ... I beg you . . ."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.

"*Crucio!*" said the cold voice.

Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too...Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there. . . .

"Harry! *Harry!*"

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneeling next to him, looking terrified.

"You all right?" he said.

"Of course he isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. "What was it, Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?"

"Nothing," Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn't stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemort's voice had sounded so close. . . .

"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now. Potter, I have experience in these matters!"

Harry looked up at her.

"I need to go to the hospital wing, I think," he said. "Bad headache."

"My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!" said Professor Trelawney. "If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever -"

"I don't want to see anything except a headache cure," said Harry.

He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.

"See you later," Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. Sirius had told him what to do if his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore's office. He marched down the corridors, thinking about what he had seen in the dream . . . it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. . . . He ran over the details in his mind, trying to make sure he could remember them. . . . He had heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder . . . but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead . . . so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake . . . he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. . . .

Harry had walked right past the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledores office without noticing. He blinked, looked around, realized what he had done, and retraced his steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't

know the password.

"Sherbet lemon?" he tried tentatively.

The gargoyle did not move.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er - Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans ... oh no, he doesn't like them, does he?... oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, its urgent!"

The gargoyle remained immovable.

Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.

"Chocolate Frog!" he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. "Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!"

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.

"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking. ..."

He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly upward as the doors closed behind him, taking him up to a polished oak door with a brass door knocker.

He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.

"Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. "Ludo says Berthas perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we've no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all. As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch's!"

"And what do you think happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.

"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked - more than likely, I'm sure you'll agree, given his personal history - lost his mind, and gone wandering off somewhere -"

"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Or else - well..." Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman *is*?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress - and an excellent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless - if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got -"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

CHAPTER THIRTY – THE PENSIEVE

The door of the office opened.

"Hello, Potter," said Moody. "Come in, then."

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore's office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pictures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore's desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat.

"Harry!" said Fudge jovially, moving forward. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry lied.

"We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds," said Fudge. "It was you who found him, was it not?"

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn't overheard what they had been saying, he added, "I didn't see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she'd have a job hiding, wouldn't she?"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge's back, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, well," said Fudge, looking embarrassed, "we're about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you'll excuse us ... perhaps if you just go back to your class -"

"I wanted to talk to you. Professor," Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

"Wait here for me, Harry," he said. "Our examination of the grounds will not take long."

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody's wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below. He looked around.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumbledore's office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the dream. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry's House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source of the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed properly. Harry hesitated, glanced at Fawkes, then got up, walked across the office, and

pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid - or like wind made solid - Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin - and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. There was something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were usually tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the corners of it. He leaned even closer, tilting his head, trying to see...

The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch - Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin -

But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool -

And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the others. He looked up at the high stone ceiling, expecting to see the circular window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone.

Breathing hard and fast. Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were at least two hundred of them) was looking at him.

Not one of them seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to the wizard next to him on the bench and uttered a loud cry of surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry - I didn't mean to - I was just looking at that basin in your cabinet - I - where are we?"

But Dumbledore didn't move or speak. He ignored Harry completely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was staring into the far corner of the room, where there was a door.

Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And then it dawned on him. . . .

Once before. Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through a page in an enchanted diary, right into somebody else's memory . . . and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had happened again. . . .

Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it energetically in front of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore did not blink, look around at Harry, or indeed move at all. And that, in Harry's opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn't ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was not the present-day Dumbledore. Yet it couldn't be that long ago . . . the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was this place? What were all these wizards waiting for?

Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had suspected when observing it from above, was almost certainly underground - more of a dungeon than a room, he thought. There was a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these serried rows of benches, rising in levels all around the room, all positioned so that they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and three people entered - or at least one man, flanked by two dementors.

Harry's insides went cold. The dementors - tall, hooded creatures whose faces were concealed - were gliding slowly toward the chair in the center of the room, each grasping one of the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to faint, and Harry couldn't blame him . . . he knew the dementors could not touch him inside a memory, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly as the dementors placed the man in the chained chair and glided back out of the room. The door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek furs, but in thin and ragged robes. He was shaking. Even as Harry watched, the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him there.

"Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw

Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the bench beside him. Crouch's hair was dark, his face was much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand that you have important information for us."

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

"I have, sir," he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. "I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I - I know that the Ministry is trying to - to round up the last of the Dark Lords supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can. ..."

There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were surveying Karkaroff with interest, others with pronounced mistrust. Then Harry heard, quite distinctly, from Dumbledores other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, "Filth."

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there - except that there was a very noticeable difference in his appearance. He did not have his magical eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense dislike.

"Crouch is going to let him out," Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he's got enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors."

Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose.

"Ah, I was forgetting . . . you don't like the dementors, do you, Albus?" said Moody with a sardonic smile.

"No," said Dumbledore calmly, "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this . . ." Moody said softly.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," said Mr. Crouch. "Let us hear them, please."

"You must understand," said Karkaroff hurriedly, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy. . . . He preferred that we - I mean to say, his supporters - and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them -"

"Get on with it," sneered Moody.

"- we never knew the names of every one of our fellows - He alone knew exactly who we all were -"

"Which was a wise move, wasn't it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in," muttered Moody.

"Yet you say you have *some* names for us?" said Mr. Crouch.

"I - I do," said Karkaroff breathlessly. "And these were important supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally renounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely -"

"These names are?" said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

"There was Antonin Dolohov," he said. "I - I saw him torture countless Muggles and - and non-supporters of the Dark Lord."

"And helped him do it," murmured Moody.

"We have already apprehended Dolohov," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after yourself."

"Indeed?" said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. "I - I am delighted to hear it!"

But he didn't look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

"Any others?" said Crouch coldly.

"Why, yes ... there was Rosier," said Karkaroff hurriedly. "Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in the struggle."

"Took a bit of me with him, though," whispered Moody to Harry's right. Harry looked around at him once more, and saw him indicating the large chunk out of his nose to Dumbledore.

"No - no more than Rosier deserved!" said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was starting to worry that none of his information would be of any use to the Ministry. Karkaroff's eyes darted toward the door in the corner, behind which the dementors undoubtedly still stood, waiting.

"Any more?" said Crouch.

"Yes!" said Karkaroff. "There was Travers - he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber - he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!"

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

"Rookwood?" said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment. "Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?"

"The very same," said Karkaroff eagerly. "I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information -"

"But Travers and Mulciber we have," said Mr. Crouch. "Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide -"

"Not yet!" cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. "Wait, I have more!"

Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

"Snape!" he shouted. "Severus Snape!"

"Snape has been cleared by this council," said Crouch disdainfully. "He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore."

"No!" shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. "I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

"I have given evidence already on this matter," he said calmly. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord Voldemort's downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore's back.

"Very well, Karkaroff," Crouch said coldly, "you have been of assistance. I shall

review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime. ..."

Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was fading; he could see only his own body - all else was swirling darkness. . . .

And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left side of Mr. Crouch. The atmosphere seemed quite different: relaxed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were at some sort of sporting event. Harry noticed a witch halfway up the rows of benches opposite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of an acid-green quill. It was, unmistakably, a younger Rita Skeeter. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sitting beside him again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more tired and somehow fiercer, gaunter. . . . Harry understood. It was a different memory, a different day ... a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room.

This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch-playing fitness. His nose wasn't broken now; he was tall and lean and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had bound Karkaroff, and Bagman, perhaps taking heart from this, glanced around at the watching crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

"Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters," said Mr. Crouch. "We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. *Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?*

"Only," said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, "well - I know I've been a bit of an idiot -"

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings. He was staring down at Ludo Bagman with an expression of the utmost severity and dislike.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw Moody sitting there again. "If I didn't know he'd always been dim, I'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. ..."

"Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort's supporters," said Mr. Crouch. "For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than -"

But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls stood up, shaking their heads, and even their fists, at Mr. Crouch.

"But I've told you, I had no idea!" Bagman called earnestly over the crowd's babble, his round blue eyes widening. "None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad's . . . never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on ... once my Quidditch days are over, you know ... I mean, I can't

keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

There were titters from the crowd.

"It will be put to the vote," said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. "The jury will please raise their hands . . . those in favor of imprisonment..."

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards around the walls began to clap. One of the witches on the jury stood up.

"Yes?" barked Crouch.

"We'd just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday," the witch said breathlessly.

Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with applause now. Bagman got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

"Despicable," Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. "Rookwood get him a job indeed. . . . The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry. . . ."

And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting beside Mr. Crouch, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was clutching a handkerchief to her mouth with trembling hands.

Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his temple.

"Bring them in," he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon.

The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw the people in the crowd turn to look up at Mr. Crouch. A few of them whispered to one another.

The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. There was a thickset man who stared blankly up at Crouch; a thinner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair and heavily hooded eyes, who was sitting in the chained chair as though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair all over his face, his freckled skin milk-white. The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief.

Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

"You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law," he said clearly, "so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous -"

"Father," said the boy with the straw-colored hair. "Father. . . please . . ."

"- that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court," said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son's voice.

"We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror - Frank Longbottom - and subjecting him to the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-

Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -"

"Father, I didn't!" shrieked the boy in chains below. "I didn't, I swear it. Father, don't send me back to the dementors -"

"You are further accused," bellowed Mr. Crouch, "of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury -"

"Mother!" screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward. "Mother, stop him. Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!"

"I now ask the jury," shouted Mr. Crouch, "to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!"

In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the walls began to clap as it had for Bagman, their faces full of savage triumph. The boy began to scream.

"No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!"

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys' three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman with the heavy-lidded eyes looked up at Crouch and called, "The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He

will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!"

But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to affect him. The crowd was jeering, some of them on their feet, as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

"I'm your son!" he screamed up at Crouch. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly. "I have no son!"

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

"Take them away!" Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. "Take them away, and may they rot there!"

"Father! Father, I wasn't involved! No! No! Father, please!"

"I think. Harry, it is time to return to my office," said a quiet voice in Harry's ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side.

There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch's son being dragged away by the dementors - and there was an Albus Dumbledore on his left, looking right at him.

"Come," said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harry's elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air; the dungeon dissolved around him; for a moment, all was blackness, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on his feet, in what seemed like the dazzling light of Dumbledore's sunlit office. The stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him.

"Professor," Harry gasped, "I know I shouldn't've - I didn't mean - the cabinet

door was sort of open and -"

"I quite understand," said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, carried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top, and sat down in the chair behind it. He motioned for Harry to sit down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

"What is it?" Harry asked shakily.

"This? It is called a Pensieve," said Dumbledore. "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind."

"Er," said Harry, who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

"At these times," said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

"You mean . . . that stuff's your *thoughts*?" Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Let me show you."

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. When he took the wand away, hair seemed to be clinging to it - but then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange silvery-white substance that filled the Pensieve. Dumbledore added this fresh thought to the basin, and Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hands on either side of the Pensieve and swirled it, rather as a gold prospector would pan for fragments of gold... and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape's, who opened his mouth and spoke to the ceiling, his voice echoing slightly.

"It's coming back . . . Karkaroff's too . . . stronger and clearer than ever..."

"A connection I could have made without assistance," Dumbledore sighed, "but never mind." He peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Harry, who was gaping at Snape's face, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. "I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily. Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Curiosity is not a sin," he said. "But we should exercise caution with our curiosity. . . yes, indeed ..."

Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, a plump, scowling girl of about sixteen, who began to revolve slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she spoke, her voice echoed as Snape's had done, as though it were coming from the depths of the stone basin. "He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I was only teasing him, sir, I only said I'd seen him kissing Florence behind the greenhouses last Thursday. . . ."

"But why. Bertha," said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, "why did you have to follow him in the first place?"

"Bertha?" Harry whispered, looking up at her. "Is that - was that Bertha Jorkins?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and opaque once more. "That was Bertha as I remember her at school."

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was looking. He knew, of course, that Dumbledore was getting on in years, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something."

"Yes," said Harry. "Professor - I was in Divination just now, and - er - I fell asleep."

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, "Quite understandable. Continue."

"Well, I had a dream," said Harry. "A dream about Lord Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail . . . you know who Wormtail-"

"I do know," said Dumbledore promptly. "Please continue."

"Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail's blunder had been repaired. He said someone was dead. Then he said, Wormtail wouldn't be fed to the snake - there was a snake beside his chair. He said - he said he'd be feeding me to it,

instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail - and my scar hurt," Harry said. "It woke me up, it hurt so badly."

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

"Er - that's all," said Harry.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

"No, I - how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay."

Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand tip to his temple, removed another shining silver thought, and added it to the Pensieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn't make out anything clearly: It was merely a blur of color.

"Professor?" he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

"My apologies," he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

"D'you - d'you know why my scar's hurting me?"

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, "I have a theory, no more than that. ... It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But . . . why?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore.

"That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think . . . that dream . . . did it really happen?"

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say - probable. Harry - did you see Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But - there wouldn't have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he hasn't got a body, has he? But. . . but then how could he have held the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed . . ."

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, placing his wand tip to his temple and adding another shining silver thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pensieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore had given him on other occasions, and always made Harry feel as though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody's magical eye could not. "Once again. Harry, I can only give you my suspicions."

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever.

"The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared . . . within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees - as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he ought to go, but his curiosity held him in his chair.

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er . . . could I ask you about. . . that court thing I was in . . . in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than others . . . particularly now. . ."

"You know - you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well . . . were they talking about Neville's parents?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. "Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?" he said.

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Nevilles parents," said Dumbledore. "His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Moody. He and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort's whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard."

"So they're dead?" said Harry quietly.

"No," said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. "They are insane. They are both in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him."

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known . . . never, in four years, bothered to find out. . .

"The Longbottoms were very popular," said Dumbledore. "The attacks on them came after Voldemort's fall from power, just when everyone thought they were safe. Those attacks caused a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, the Longbottoms' evidence was - given their condition - none too reliable."

"Then Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"As to that, I have no idea."

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was burning to ask . . . but they concerned the guilt of living people. . . .

"Er," he said, "Mr. Bagman . . ."

"... has never been accused of any Dark activity since," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Right," said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pensieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Dumbledore had stopped adding thoughts. "And . . . er . . ."

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him.

Snape's face was swimming on the surface again. Dumbledore glanced down into it, and then up at Harry.

"No more has Professor Snape," he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore's light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"What made you think he'd really stopped supporting Voldemort, Professor?"

Dumbledore held Harry's gaze for a few seconds, and then said, "That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and myself."

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told Harry it was time to go. He stood up, and so did Dumbledore.

"Harry," he said as Harry reached the door. "Please do not speak about Neville's parents to anybody else. He has the right to let people know, when he is ready."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, turning to go.

"And-"

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light, looking older than ever. He stared at Harry for a moment, and then said, "Good luck with the third task."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – THE THIRD TASK

Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who's getting stronger again as well?" Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had now shared with Ron and Hermione - and, of course, with Sirius, to whom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumbledore's office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the common room once again that night, talking it all over until Harry's mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that it would have been a relief to siphon them off.

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm.

"And he trusts Snape?" Ron said. "He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry thought she too looked as though she could have done with a Pensieve.

"Rita Skeeter," she muttered finally.

"How can you be worrying about her now?" said Ron, in utter disbelief.

"I'm not worrying about her," Hermione said to her knees. "I'm just thinking. . . remember what she said to me in the Three Broomsticks? 'I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl.' This is what she meant, isn't it? She reported his trial, she knew he'd passed information to the Death Eaters. And Winky too, remember . . . 'Ludo Bagman's a bad wizard.' Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home."

"Yeah, but Bagman didn't pass information on purpose, did he?"

Hermione shrugged.

"And Fudge reckons *Madame Maxime* attacked Crouch?" Ron said, turning back to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he's only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage."

"We never thought of her, did we?" said Ron slowly. "Mind you, she's definitely got giant blood, and she doesn't want to admit it-"

"Of course she doesn't," said Hermione sharply, looking up. "Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about his mother. Look at Fudge, jumping to conclusions about her, just because she's part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I'd probably say I had big bones if I knew that's what I'd get for telling the truth."

Hermione looked at her watch. "We haven't done any practicing!" she said, looking shocked. "We were going to do the Impediment Curse! We'll have to really get down to it tomorrow! Come on, Harry, you need to get some sleep."

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Neville's bed. True to his word to Dumbledore, he had not told Ron and Hermione about Neville's parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must feel to have parents still living but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville's snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did. Lying in the darkness, Harry felt a rush of anger and hate toward the people who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. . . . He remembered the jeers of the crowd as Crouch's

son and his companions had been dragged from the court by the dementors. ... He understood how they had felt. . . . Then he remembered the milk-white face of the screaming boy and realized with a jolt that he had died a year later. . . .

It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. ... He was the one who had torn these families apart, who had ruined all these lives. . . .

Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, but they were putting most of their efforts into helping Harry prepare.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn't mind practicing on his own for a while, "at least we'll get top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We'd never have found out about all these hexes in class."

"Good training for when we're all Aurors," said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had buzzed into the room and making it stop dead in midair.

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practicing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Moody was right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers before now, and this time he had some notice, some chance to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school. Professor McGonagall had given them permission to use the empty Transfiguration classroom at lunchtimes. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and obstruct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would enable him to blast solid objects out of his way; and the Four-Point Spell, a useful discovery of Hermiones that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check whether he was going in the right direction within the maze. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around himself that deflected minor curses; Hermione managed to shatter it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had looked up the counter-jinx.

"You're still doing really well, though," Hermione said encouragingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells they had already learned. "Some of these are bound to come in handy."

"Come and look at this," said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. "What's Malfoy doing?"

Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be keeping a lookout; both were smirking. Malfoy was holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

"He looks like he's using a walkie-talkie," said Harry curiously.

"He can't be," said Hermione, "I've told you, those sorts of things don't work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry," she added briskly, turning away from the window and moving back into the middle of the room, "let's try that Shield Charm again."

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task before they concerned themselves with anything else. He reminded Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of Hogwarts was not Harry's responsibility, nor was it within his power to influence it.

If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on you while you are under Dumbledore's protection, but all the same, take no risks: Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters.

Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the first and second tasks. For one thing, he was confident that, this time, he had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and however well or badly he did, the tournament would at last be over, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the third task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry a good-luck card from Sirius. It was only a piece of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech owl arrived for Hermione, carrying her morning copy of the *Daily Prophet* as usual. She unfolded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her. "Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline and said, "No way. Not today. That old *cow*."

"What?" said Harry. "Rita Skeeter again?"

"No," said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

"It's about me, isn't it?" said Harry.

"No," said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone. But before Harry could demand to see the paper, Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

"Hey, Potter! *Potter!* How's your head? You feeling all right? Sure you're not going to go berserk on us?"

Malfoy was holding a copy of the *Daily Prophet* too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats to see Harry's reaction.

"Let me see it," Harry said to Ron. "Give it here."

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, beneath the banner headline:

“HARRY POTTER "DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS”

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. Alarming evi-

dence has recently come to light about Harry Potter's strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School.

Potter, the *Daily Prophet* can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your *Daily Prophet* reporter witnessed Potter storming from the class, claiming that his scar was hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potter's brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion.

"He might even be pretending," said one specialist. "This could be a plea for attention."

The *Daily Prophet*, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has carefully concealed from the wizarding public.

"Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he's made friends with werewolves and giants too. We think he'd do anything for a bit of power."

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue "as worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated with evildoers." Similarly, "anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a fondness for violence."

Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his desperation to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

"Gone off me a bit, hasn't she?" said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pulling grotesquely mad faces, and wagging their tongues like snakes.

"How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?" Ron said. "There's no way she was there, there's no way she could've heard -"

"The window was open," said Harry. "I opened it to breathe."

"You were at the top of North Tower!" Hermione said. "Your voice couldn't have carried all the way down to the grounds!"

"Well, you're the one who's supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!" said Harry. "You tell me how she did it!"

"I've been trying!" said Hermione. "But I... but..."

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione's face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Are you all right?" said Ron, frowning at her.

"Yes," said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth, as though speaking into an invisible walkie-talkie. Harry and Ron stared at each other.

"I've had an idea," Hermione said, gazing into space. "I think I know... because then no one would be able to see... even Moody... and she'd have been able to get onto the window ledge... but she's not allowed... she's *definitely* not allowed... I think we've got her! Just give me two seconds in the library - just to make sure!"

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

"Oi!" Ron called after her. "We've got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey," he said, turning back to Harry, "she must really hate that Skeeter woman to risk missing the start of an exam. What're you going to do in Binns's class - read again?"

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class so far, looking up fresh hexes for the third task.

"S'pose so," Harry said to Ron; but just then, Professor McGonagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward him.

"Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," she said.

"But the task's not till tonight!" said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," she said. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them."

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

"She doesn't expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?" he asked Ron blankly.

"Dunno," said Ron. "Harry, I'd better hurry, I'm going to be late for Binns. See you later."

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and join Cedric as he crossed to the side chamber and entered. Krum slouched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn't want to go into the chamber. He had no family - no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.

"Harry, come on, they're waiting for you!"

Utterly perplexed. Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn't possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his father's hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering

away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you. Harry!" She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great interest over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had no objection whatsoever to long hair or earrings with fangs on them.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment - the Dursleys -"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time they were mentioned.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

"She was here in my time," said Mrs. Weasley. "She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning -"

"What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?" said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

"Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll," she said. "He got caught by Apollyon Pringle - he was the caretaker in those days - your father's still got the marks."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" said Bill.

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

"There you are, are you?" he said, looking Harry up and down.

"Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedrics caught you up on points, are you?"

"What?" said Harry.

"Ignore him," said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. "He's been angry ever since Rita Skeeters article about the Triwizard Tournament - you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion."

"Didn't bother to correct her, though, did he?" said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door with Mrs. Weasley and Bill. "Still, . . . you'll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around.

"The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disappearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. They're not letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum - Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table.

"What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly. "I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to cook. How was your exam?"

"Oh . . . okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, helping himself to a Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley looked stern, "they're all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn't hard."

Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening's task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brainwave about Rita Skeeter.

"Are you going to tell us - ?"

Hermione shook her head warningly and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

"Hello, Hermione," said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

"Hello," said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expression on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry looked between them, then said, "Mrs. Weasley, you didn't believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in *Witch Weekly*, did you? Because Hermione's not my girlfriend."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Weasley "No - of course I didn't!"

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cornelius Fudge, who was sitting next to Madame Maxime, looked stern and was not talking. Madame Maxime was concentrating on her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her,

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was starting to feel really nervous now, didn't eat much. As the enchanted ceiling overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your

way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applauding him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right. Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practicing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the stadium and approached Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck. Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, "*Sonorus*," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each - Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points - Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place - Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!"

Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He waved up at them, and they waved back, beaming at him.

"So ... on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three - two - one -"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He pulled out his wand, muttered, "*Lumos*," and heard

Cedric do the same just behind him.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

"See you," Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman's whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork.

"*Point Me*," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry didn't know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

"Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous - I only just got away!"

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw ... a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do....

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes. . . . Harry had never seen a dementor stumble.

"Hang on!" he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus, "You're a boggart! *Riddikulus!*"

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company...but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left ... right... left again . . . Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand's beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way.

"*Reducio!*" he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects. What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

"Fleur?" Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, *think*. . .

But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had two choices - try and move, or send up red sparks, and get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he wouldn't be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadying breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had screamed. What had she met? Was she all right? There was no sign of red sparks - did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach her wand? Harry took the right fork with a feeling of increasing unease . . . but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking. *One champion down*. . .

The cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, hadn't he? What if he actually managed to win? Fleeting, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school. . . .

He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Cedric was right - it *was* enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over. *"IMPEDIMENTA!"*

The skrewt was inches from him when it froze - he had managed to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting, Harry pushed himself away from it and ran, hard, in the opposite direction - the Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

"What are you doing?" yelled Cedric's voice. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

And then Harry heard Krum's voice.

"Crucio!"

The air was suddenly full of Cedric's yells. Horrified, Harry began sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric's. When none appeared, he tried the Reductor Curse again. It wasn't very effective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick brambles and branches until they broke and made an opening; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Krum standing over him.

Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there panting, his hands over his face.

"Are you all right?" Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric's arm.

"Yeah," panted Cedric. "Yeah ... I don't believe it... he crept up behind me. ... I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me. . . ."

Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

"I can't believe this ... I thought he was all right," Harry said, staring at Krum.

"So did I," said Cedric.

"Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Cedric. "You don't think Krum got her too?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly.

"Should we leave him here?" Cedric muttered.

"No," said Harry. "I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone'll come and collect him . . . otherwise he'll probably be eaten by a skrewt."

"He'd deserve it," Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, "Well... I s'pose we'd better go on. . . ."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh . . . yeah . . . right. . ."

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum - now the fact that they were opponents came back to Harry. The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human being meant a life term in Azkaban, that was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly....Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary creature, one which he had only seen in picture form, in his *Monster Book of Monsters*.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So ... so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess - I let you pass. Answer wrongly - I attack. Remain silent - I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry's stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

"Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

*"First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"*

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again . . . more slowly?" he asked tentatively. She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem. "All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn't want to kiss?" Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a "yes." Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of animals he wouldn't want to kiss; his immediate thought was a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but something told him that wasn't the answer. He'd have to try and work out the clues. . . .

"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies ... er ... that'd be a - an impostor. No, that's not my guess! A - a spy? I'll come back to that. . . could you give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

"The last thing to mend," Harry repeated. "Er ... no idea . . . 'middle of middle' . . . could I have the last bit again?"

She gave him the last four lines.

"The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word," said Harry. "Er . . . that'd be ... er ... hang on - 'er!' Er's a sound!"

The sphinx smiled at him.

"Spy ... er ... spy ... er ..." said Harry, pacing up and down. "A creature I wouldn't want to kiss . . . *a spider!*"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. . . His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance. . . .

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "*Point Me!*" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs -

Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it -

"Cedric!" Harry bellowed. "On your left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric's wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead.

"*Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!*"

But it was no use - the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in excruciating pain. He could hear Cedric yelling "*Stupefy!*" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's - Harry raised his wand as the spider opened its pincers once more and shouted "*Expelliarmus!*" It worked - the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider's underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted "*Stupefy!*" just as Cedric yelled the same thing.

The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewing the path with a tangle of hairy legs.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

"No," Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, gluey secretion from the spider's pincers on his torn robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

"Take it, then," Harry panted to Cedric. "Go on, take it. You're there."

But Cedric didn't move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support himself. Cedric took a deep breath.

"You take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Harry said. He felt angry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from trying to throw off the spider, and after all his efforts, Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he'd beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. "The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That's you. I'm telling you, I'm not going to win any races on this leg."

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

"No," he said.

"Stop being noble," said Harry irritably. "Just take it, then we can get out of here."

Cedric watched Harry steadying himself, holding tight to the hedge.

"You told me about the dragons," Cedric said. "I would've gone down in the first task if you hadn't told me what was coming."

"I had help on that too," Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. "You helped me with the egg - we're square."

"I had help on the egg in the first place," said Cedric.

"We're still square," said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle when the spider had dropped him.

"You should've got more points on the second task," said Cedric mulishly. "You stayed behind to get all the hostages. I should've done that."

"I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song seriously!" said Harry bitterly. "Just take the cup!"

"No," said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider's tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House hadn't had in centuries.

"Go on," Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Cho's face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before . . . and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric's shadowy, stubborn face.

"Both of us," Harry said.

"What?"

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

"You - you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn't believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

"You're on," he said. "Come here."

He grabbed Harry's arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they had reached it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleaming handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One - two - three -"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO – FLESH, BLOOD, AND BONE

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup at last. He raised his head.

"Where are we?" he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles - perhaps hundreds of miles - for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

"Did anyone tell *you* the cup was a Portkey?" he asked.

"Nope," said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. "Is this supposed to be part of the task?"

"I dunno," said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. "Wands out, d'you reckon?"

"Yeah," said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

"Someone's coming," he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry couldn't make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And - several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time - Harry saw that the thing in the person's arms looked like a baby ... or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to watch the approaching figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second, Harry and Cedric and the short figure simply looked at one another.

And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "*Kill the spare.*"

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

A blast of green light blazed through Harry's eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; the pain in his scar reached such a pitch that he retched, and then it diminished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wandlight before he was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him - hit him with a hand that had a finger missing. And Harry realized who was under the hood. It was Wormtail.

"You!" he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy

checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, rumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn't move an inch, Wormtail drew a length of some black material from the inside of his cloak and stuffed it roughly into Harry's mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn't make a sound, nor could he see where Wormtail had gone; he couldn't turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry's wand was on the ground at Cedric's feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar seared with pain again . . . and he suddenly knew that he didn't want to see what was in those robes ... he didn't want that bundle opened....

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone where he was tied. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water - Harry could hear it slopping around - and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Wormtail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling noises beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now ..." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind - but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face - no child alive ever had a face like that - flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Wormtail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face

illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, *please. . . let it drown. . .*

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs.

"Flesh - of the servant - w-willingly given - you will - revive - your master. "

He stretched his right hand out in front of him - the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened - he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail's anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn't stand to look . . . but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry's closed eyelids. . .

Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail's anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

"B-blood of the enemy . . . forcibly taken . . . you will. . . resurrect your foe."

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. . . Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtail's remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, rummaged in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harry's blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened. . . .

Let it have drowned. Harry thought, *let it have gone wrong. . . •*

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. . . . *It's gone wrong,* he thought. . . *it's drowned. . . please . . . please let it be dead. . .*

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the

dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . . and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snake with slits for nostrils . . . Lord Voldemort had risen again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE – THE DEATH EATERS

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which had slithered back into sight and was circling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and lay there, crumpled up and crying. Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord . . ." he choked, "my Lord . . . you promised . . . you did promise ..."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master . . . thank you, Master ..."

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please . . . *please* ..."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tattoo - a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth - the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see ... now we shall know ..."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his

gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool. . . very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. . ."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. . . He didn't like magic, my father . . ."

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born. Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage . . . but I vowed to find him . . . I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name . . . *Tom Riddle*. . ."

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history . . ." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental. . . . But look, Harry! My *true* family returns. . . ."

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one they moved forward . . . slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his black robes.

Master . . . Master " he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind rustling seemed to run around the circle, as though it had shivered.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years. . . thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! *Or are we?*"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench or guilt upon the air."

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt appearances! and I ask myself . . . why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment. . . ."

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. . . perhaps they now pay allegiance to another . . . perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

"It is a disappointment to me . . . I confess myself disappointed. . . ."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

"*Crucio!*"

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. . . . *Let the police come*, he thought desperately . . . *anyone . . . anything*. . .

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years . . . I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Master," moaned Wormtail, "please. Master . . . please . . ."

"Yet you helped return me to my body," said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me . . . and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers. . . ."

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand's wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail's bleeding wrist.

Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder.

"My Lord," he whispered. "Master . . . it is beautiful. . . thank you. . . *thank you*. . ."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord . . . never, my Lord . . ."

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail's right.

"Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. . . . Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay. . . but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me -"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. . . . You have disappointed me. . . . I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course. . . . You are merciful, thank you. . . ."

Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space - large enough for two people - that separated Malfoy and the next man.

"The Lestranges should stand here," said Voldemort quietly. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me. . . . When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us . . . they are our natural allies . . . we will recall the banished giants . . . I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. . . ."

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

"Macnair . . . destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide. . . ."

"Thank you, Master . . . thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here" - Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures - "we have Crabbe . . . you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?"

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master . . ."

"We will, Master. . . ."

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyle's shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful -"

"That will do," said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters . . . three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return ... he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever ... he will be killed, of course . . . and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already reentered my service."

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. . . .

"Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke from under the mask.

"Master, we crave to know ... we beg you to tell us ... how you have achieved this . . . this miracle . . . how you managed to return to us. . . ."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins - and ends - with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him - and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen. ... I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces other sacrifice. . . . This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah . . . pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost. . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal - to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked ... for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself... for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. . . .

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. ... I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. . . . Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me. . . one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body . . . , but I waited in vain. ..."

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me.

I sometimes inhabited animals - snakes, of course, being my preference - but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . .

"Then . . . four years ago . . . the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard - young, foolish, and gullible - wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of... for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school... he was easy to bend to my will... he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted . . . thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. ..."

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glittering eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. . . . Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour... I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess . . . and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. ..."

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last... a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumored I was hiding . . . helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them. . . .

"But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food . . . and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic.

"Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. But Wormtail - displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him - convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her ... he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams ... for - with a little persuasion - she became a veritable mine of information.

"She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this

year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things. . . but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her."

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless.

"Wormtail's body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and, poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth ... a spell or two of my own invention ... a little help from my dear Nagini," Voldemort's red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, "a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided ... I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel.

"There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer's Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower ... I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength.

"I knew that to achieve this - it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight - I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. . . .

"My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe ... Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me ... as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potters blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago . . . for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. . . .

"But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better protected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the boy's future. Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the boy's protection as long as he is in his relations' care. Not even I can touch him there. . . . Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup. ... I thought his protection might be weaker there, away from his relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wizards. And then, the boy would return to Hogwarts, where he is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?

"Why ... by using Bertha Jorkins's information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament - that he touched the Triwizard Cup first - the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here he is ... the boy you all believed had been my downfall. ..."

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end ... to black out... to die ...

And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini," he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

"Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR – PRIORI INCANTATEM

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were untied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric's body lay and returned with Harry's wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry's hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel. Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago. ... All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, "*Expelliarmus*". . . and what use would it be to deprive Voldemort of his wand, even if he could, when he was surrounded by Death Eaters, outnumbered by at least thirty to one? He had never learned anything that could possibly fit him for this. He knew he was facing the thing against which Moody had always warned . . . the unblockable *Avada Kedavra* curse - and Voldemort was right - his mother was not here to die for him this time. ... He was quite unprotected. . . .

"We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed. . . . Dumbledore would like you to show manners. . . . Bow to death, Harry. ..."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him ... he was not going to give him that satisfaction. . . .

"I said, *bow*," Voldemort said, raising his wand - and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man . . . straight-backed and proud, the way your father died. . . .

"And now - we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatu s Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. . . . White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he'd ever screamed in his life -

And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut *off*; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause . . . That hurt, didn't it. Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so ... he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort... he wasn't going to beg.

. . .

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly.

"Answer me! *Imperial*"

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. . . . Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming . . . *just answer no ... say no ... just answer no. . . .*

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

I won't do it, I won't say it. ...

Just answer no. . . .

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him - back rushed the aches that the Cruciatu s Curse had left all over his body - back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing. . . .

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. . . . Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort s father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry . . . come out and play, then ... it will be quick ... it might even

be painless ... I would not know... I have never died. . . ."

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope ... no help to be had. And as he heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was beyond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort's feet... he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. . . .

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone. Harry stood up ... he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" Voldemort cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort's wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's - they met in midair - and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to - and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then - nothing could have prepared Harry for this - he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves. . . . The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering at their heels, some of them drawing their wands -

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now. . . .

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. ... It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry. . . the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. . . . He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. ... It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. . . .

Don't break the connection.

I know. Harry told the music, I know I mustn't. . . but no sooner had he thought

it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever . . . and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too ... it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands - Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. . . . The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily. . . .

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry's wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers -

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed . . . and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way . . . and it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now . . . Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful. . . .

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve . . . but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand . . . and slowly . . . very slowly ... it moved along the golden thread ... it trembled for a moment. . . and then it connected. . . .

At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain . . . then - Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock - a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished . . . the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail. . . more shouts of pain . . . and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. ... It was a head . . . now a chest and arms . . . the torso of Cedric Diggory.

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (*was it a ghost? it looked so solid*) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort's wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel. . . and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"Hold on, Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort ... his wide red eyes were still shocked ... he had no more expected this than Harry had . . . and, very dimly. Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. .

More screams of pain from the wand . . . and then something else emerged from its tip ... the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso ... an old man Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done . . . and his ghost, or his shadow, or whatever it was, fell next to Cedric's, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his walking stick. . . .

"He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort. "Killed me, that one did. . . . You fight him, boy. . . ."

But already, yet another head was emerging ... and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman's. . . . Harry, both arms shaking now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. . . .

The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

"Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedric's as though from very far away. "Don't let him get you, Harry - don't let go!"

She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it... and Voldemort's dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand . . . and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be ... he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand . . . knew, because the man appearing was the one he'd thought of more than any other tonight. . . .

The smoky shadow of a tall man with untidy hair fell to the ground as Bertha had done, straightened up, and looked at him . . . and Harry, his arms shaking madly now, looked back into the ghostly face of his father.

"Your mother's coming . . ." he said quietly. "She wants to see you ... it will be all right... hold on. . . ."

And she came. . . first her head, then her body... a young woman with long hair, the smoky, shadowy form of Lily Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort's wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like her husband. She walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and she spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. . . .

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time. . . you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts ... do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

"Harry . . ." whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents, ..."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run . . . do it now. ..."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway - he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died - but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear - they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze -

And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind headstones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the headstones - he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric's body, no longer aware of the pain in his leg, his whole being concentrated on what he had to do -

"*Stun him!*" he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red

light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it. Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel -

"Impedimenta!" he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped over the cup and dived as he heard more wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm...

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort. Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the cup was out of reach -

Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup. It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle -

He heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked - it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, and Cedric along with him. . . . They were going back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE – VERITASERUM

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while the Portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him were swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold handle of the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's body. He felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass, waiting . . . waiting for someone to do something . . . something to happen . . . and all the while, his scar burned dully on his forehead. . . .

A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, screams. . . . He remained where he was, his face screwed up against the noise, as though it were a nightmare that would pass. . . .

Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

"Harry! *Harry!*"

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people pressed in around them, pushing nearer; Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above.

Harry let go of the cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore's wrist, while Dumbledore's face swam in and out of focus.

"He's back," Harry whispered. "He's back. Voldemort."

"What's going on? What's happened?"

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

"My God - Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore - he's dead!"

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them . . . and then others shouted it - screeched it - into the night - "He's dead!" "He's *dead!*" "Cedric Diggory! *Dead!*"

"Harry, let go of him," he heard Fudge's voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric's limp body, but Harry wouldn't let him go. Then Dumbledore's face, which was still blurred and misted, came closer.

"Harry, you can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me to bring him back," Harry muttered - it seemed important to explain this. "He wanted me to bring him back to his parents. ..."

"That's right. Harry . . . just let go now. . . ."

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and set -him on his feet. Harry swayed. His head was pounding. His injured leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on him - "What's happened?" "What's wrong with him?" "*Diggory's dead!*"

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured - Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands. ..."

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him -"

"No, I would prefer -"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running . . . he's coming over. . . . Don't you think you should tell him - before he sees - ?"

"Harry, stay here -"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically.... The scene flickered oddly before Harry's eyes. . . .

"It's all right, son, I've got you . . . come on ... hospital wing . . ."

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up; his vision was blurring worse than ever.

"You need to lie down. . . . Come on now...."

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard people gasping, screaming, and shouting as the man supporting him pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ship, Harry heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the man helping him walk.

"What happened. Harry?" the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. *Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.* It was Mad-Eye Moody.

"Cup was a Portkey," said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. "Took me and Cedric to a graveyard . . . and Voldemort was there . . . Lord Voldemort..."

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs . . .

"The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?"

"Killed Cedric . . . they killed Cedric. . . ."

"And then?"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor . . .

"Made a potion . . . got his body back. . . ."

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?"

"And the Death Eaters came . . . and then we dueled. . . ."

"You dueled with the Dark Lord?"

"Got away . . . my wand . . . did something funny. . . . I saw my mum and dad . . . they came out of his wand. . . ."

"In here. Harry . . . in here, and sit down. . . . You'll be all right now . . . drink this. . . ."

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into his hands.

"Drink it... you'll feel better . . . come on, now. Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. . . ."

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harry's throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody's office came into sharper focus, and so did Moody himself. . . . He looked as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry's face.

"Voldemort's back, Harry? You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"He took stuff from his father's grave, and from Wormtail, and me," said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn't hurting so badly; he could now see Moody's face distinctly, even though the office was dark. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

"What did the Dark Lord take from you?" said Moody.

"Blood," said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail's dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Loads of them . . ."

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?"

But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway -

"There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There's a Death Eater here - they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end -"

Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

"I know who the Death Eater is," he said quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Harry wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them . . . but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's *gone*? He ran away? But then - he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that."

Harry heard, but didn't believe.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You didn't do that. . . you can't have done..."

"I assure you I did," said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed

upon the door, and Harry knew he was making sure that there was no one outside it. At the same time, Moody drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"He forgave them, then?" he said. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

"What?" said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

"I asked you," said Moody quietly, "whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn't even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky."

"*You* fired . . . What are you talking about. . . ?"

"I told you. Harry ... I told you. If there's one thing I hate more than any other, it's a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry. . . ." Moody's face was suddenly lit with an insane smile. "Tell me he told them that I, I alone remained faithful... prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all... *you*"

"You didn't... it - it can't be you. ..."

"Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way you could beat the dragon? *I did*"

Moody's magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ever.

"It hasn't been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cunning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start - then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I also had to contend with your stupidity. The second task . . . that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I had to give you another hint -"

"You didn't," Harry said hoarsely. "Cedric gave me the clue -"

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then, Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time ... all those hours in the library. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave it to the Longbottom boy, don't you remember? *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask everyone and anyone you could for help. Longbottom would have told you in an instant. But you did not. . . you did not. . . . You

have a streak of pride and independence that might have ruined all.

"So what could I do? Feed you information from another innocent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present. I called the elf to the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the hostages who had been taken, and whether Potter would think to use gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape's office and then hurried to find you..."

Moody's wand was still pointing directly at Harry's heart. Over his shoulder, foggy shapes were moving in the Foe-Glass on the wall.

"You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again.

"You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course," said Moody. "I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the cup clear."

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn't see how this could be. ... Dumbledore's friend, the famous Auror. . . the one who had caught so many Death Eaters ... It made no sense ... no sense at all. ...

The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three people over Moody's shoulder, moving closer and closer. But Moody wasn't watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

"The Dark Lord didn't manage to kill you, Potter, and he *so* wanted to," whispered Moody. "Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him - the thing he needed above all to regenerate - and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter . . . closer than a son. ..."

Moody's normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would never reach his own wand in time. . . .

"The Dark Lord and I," said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, "have much in common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers . . . very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure . . . the very great pleasure ... of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!"

"You're mad," Harry said - he couldn't stop himself - "you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. "We'll see! We'll see who's mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Harry Potter, you did not conquer him - and now - I conquer you!"

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes -

"Stupefy!" There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody's office was blasted apart -

Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody's face had been, saw Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall looking back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and

saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore in front, his wand outstretched.

At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. The look upon Dumbledore's face as he stared down at the unconscious form of Mad-Eye Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no benign smile upon Dumbledore's face, no twinkle in the eyes behind the spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he were giving off burning heat.

He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moody's unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, so that his face was visible. Snape followed him, looking into the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Professor McGonagall went straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along . . . hospital wing ..."

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to - look at him - he's been through enough tonight -"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why,"

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbelief. "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew - and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a set of keys on a ring. Then he turned to Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left the office. Dumbledore walked over to the trunk with seven locks, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a mass of spell-books. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed a second key in the second lock, and opened the trunk again. The spellbooks had vanished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneako-scopes, some parchment and quills, and what looked like a silvery Invisibility Cloak. Harry watched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk each time, and revealing different contents each time. Then he placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently fast asleep, thin and starved in appearance, was the real Mad-Eye Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the

magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and chunks of his grizzled hair were missing. Harry stared, thunderstruck, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He bent over him.

"Stunned - controlled by the Imperius Curse - very weak," he said. "Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Harry, throw down the imposter's cloak - he's freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk again. Then he picked up the hip flask that stood upon the desk, unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

"Polyjuice Potion, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never *does* drink except from his hip flask, he's well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair ..." Dumbledore looked down on the Moody in the trunk. "The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequently as he should have done ... on the hour . . . every hour. . . . We shall see."

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Harry stared at him too. Minutes passed in silence... .

Then, before Harry's very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin was becoming smooth; the mangled nose became whole and started to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly, with a loud *clunk*, the wooden leg fell away as a normal leg regrew in its place; next moment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it rolled away across the floor and continued to swivel in every direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freckled, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had seen him in Dumbledore's Pensieve, had watched him being led away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent. . . but he was lined around the eyes now and looked much older. . . .

There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall was right behind them.

"Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape's legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?"

She flung herself forward onto the young man's chest.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," said Dumbledore. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry in class. Dumbledore got up, bent over the man on the floor, and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were still glaring down upon them all. Winky remained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dumbledore forced the mans mouth open and poured three drops inside it. Then he pointed his wand at the mans chest and said, "*Ennervate.*"

Crouch's son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused. Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were level.

"Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man's eyelids flickered.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I would like you to tell us," said Dumbledore softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

"My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her as he had never loved me. He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other's appearance."

Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

"Say no more. Master Barty, say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!"

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice.

"The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

"My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried under my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me."

The man's eyelids flickered.

"And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Staged my mother's death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . . of returning to his service."

"How did your father subdue you?" said Dumbledore.

"The Imperius Curse," Moody said. "I was under my fathers control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior."

"Master Barty, Master Barty," sobbed Winky through her hands. "You isn't ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble. ..."

"Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?" said Dumbledore softly.

"Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?"

"Yes," said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. "A witch in my father's office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father's signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she'd found out. Too powerful. He said it damaged her memory permanently."

"Why is she coming to nose into my masters private business?" sobbed Winky. "Why isn't she leaving us be?"

"Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup," said Dumbledore.

"Winky talked my father into it," said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. "She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

"It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the middle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a boys pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?"

"We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never been to Azkaban. The ones who had never suffered for my master. They had turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were merely making sport of Muggles. The sound of their voices awoke me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand.

I wanted to attack them for their disloyalty to my master. My father had left the tent; he had gone to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She pulled me from the tent, pulled me into the forest, away from the Death Eaters. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what loyalty to the Dark Lord meant, and to punish them for their lack of it. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

"Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells everywhere. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky and I stood. The bond connecting us was

broken. We were both Stunned.

"When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found and felt me lying there. He waited until the other Ministry members had left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She had let me acquire a wand. She had almost let me escape."

Winky let out a wail of despair.

"Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then . . . and then . . ." Crouch's head rolled on his neck, and an insane grin spread across his face. "My master came for me.

"He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania. He had tortured her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, was going to teach at Hogwarts. He tortured her until he broke through the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my father kept me imprisoned to prevent me from seeking my master. And so my master knew that I was still his faithful servant - perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, based upon the information Bertha had given him. He needed me. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door."

The smile spread wider over Crouch's face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky's petrified brown eyes were visible through her fingers. She seemed too appalled to speak.

"It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned, controlled. My master forced him to go about his business as usual, to act as though nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years.

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumbledore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to serve him, to prove myself to him. He told me he needed to place a faithful servant at Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without appearing to do so. A servant who would watch over Harry Potter. Ensure he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master. But first -"

"You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm.

"Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a struggle. There was a commotion. We managed to subdue him just in time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it; I became Moody's double. I took his leg and his eye. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dustbins move around the yard. I told Arthur Weasley I had heard intruders in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark detectors, put them in the trunk with Moody, and set off for Hogwarts. I kept him alive, under the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out about his past, learn his habits, so that I could fool even

Dumbledore. I also needed his hair to make the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boom-slang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master found me in his office, I said I was under orders to search it."

"And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?" said Dumbledore.

"Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father's house, and to keep watch over my father."

"But your father escaped," said Dumbledore.

"Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was happening. My master decided it was no longer safe for my father to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But Wormtail neglected his duty. He was not watchful enough. My father escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything, to confess. He was going to admit that he had smuggled me from Azkaban.

"My master sent me word of my father's escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the map I had taken from Harry Potter. The map that had almost ruined everything."

"Map?" said Dumbledore quickly. "What map is this?"

"Potter's map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from Snape's office one night. He thought I was my father. We have the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated Dark wizards. Potter believed my father was after Snape.

"For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the grounds. I pulled on my Invisibility Cloak and went down to meet him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; my master needed him. Potter ran to get Dumbledore. I Stunned Krum. I killed my father."

"*Noooo!*" wailed Winky. "Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?"

"You killed your father," Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. "What did you do with the body?"

"Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. He met Snape. Dumbledore joined them. I watched Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, doubled around behind them, went to meet them. I told Dumbledore Snape had told me where to come.

"Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father's body. Watched the map. When everyone was gone, I Transfigured my father's body. He became a bone ... I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid's cabin."

There was complete silence now, except for Winky's continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, "And tonight. . ."

"I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner," whispered Barty Crouch. "Turned it into a Portkey. My master's plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX – THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand once more and ropes flew out of it, ropes that twisted themselves around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?"

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being sick. However, when she drew out her wand and pointed it at Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady.

"Severus" - Dumbledore turned to Snape - "please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing. Then go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour's time if he needs me."

Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, now returned in full measure. He also realized that he was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor.

"I want you to come up to my office first. Harry," he said quietly as they headed up the passageway. "Sirius is waiting for us there."

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He didn't want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn't want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric. . . dead. . . Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents. . . .

"Professor," Harry mumbled, "where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?"

"They are with Professor Sprout," said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. "She was Head of Cedric's house, and knew him best."

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside, and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift moment, he had crossed the room.

"Harry, are you all right? I knew it - I knew something like this - what happened?"

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.

"What happened?" he asked more urgently.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn't have to

think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry's knee.

"Lo, Fawkes," said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix's beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze. Harry," said Dumbledore.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we, Dumbledore?" said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let him have a sleep. Let him rest."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius's words. He leaned forward toward Harry.

Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head and looked into those blue eyes.

"If I thought I could help you," Dumbledore said gently, "by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened."

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the potion that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric's body, lying on the ground beside the cup.

Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry's shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous were being extracted from him. It was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry started. Dumbledore walked around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn and the cut beneath them.

"He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the protection my - my mother left in me - he'd have it too. And he was right - he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore's eyes. But next second, Harry was sure he had imagined it, for when Dumbledore had returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

"Very well," he said, sitting down again. "Voldemort has overcome that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort's speech to the Death Eaters. Then he told how Voldemort had untied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins ... his father . . . his mother . . .

He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

"The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

"*Priori Incantatem*," he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry's and it was almost as though an invisible beam of understanding shot between them.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Sirius sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. *This* phoenix, in fact," he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, amazed.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" said Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle ... a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed - in reverse. The most recent first. . . and then those which preceded it. . . ."

He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

"Which means," said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry's face, "that some form of Cedric must have reappeared."

Harry nodded again.

"Diggory came back to life?" said Sirius sharply.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," said Dumbledore heavily. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand . . . am I correct, Harry?"

"He spoke to me," Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. "The . . . the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke."

"An echo," said Dumbledore, "which retained Cedric's appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared . . . less recent victims of Voldemort's wand..."

"An old man," Harry said, his throat still constricted. "Bertha Jorkins. And . . ."

"Your parents?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes," said Harry.

Sirius's grip on Harry's shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

"The last murders the wand performed," said Dumbledore, nodding. "In reverse

order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection. Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows . . . what did they do?"

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry's mother had told him what to do, how Cedric's had made its final request.

At this point. Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hands.

Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its beautiful head against Harry's injured leg, and thick, pearly tears were falling from its eyes onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was repaired.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight. Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shouldered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it - and you have now given us all we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace . . . Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the office, accompanying them down a flight of stairs to the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey. They appeared to be demanding to know where Harry was and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog entered, and Mrs. Weasley let out a kind of muffled scream.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved between them.

"Molly," he said, holding up a hand, "please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him," he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Bill too, "you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy, and hissed, "Did you hear? He needs quiet!"

"Headmaster," said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius, "may I ask what - ?"

"This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," said Dumbledore simply. "I assure you, he is extremely well trained. Harry - I will wait while you get into bed."

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn't as though he didn't want them there; but the thought of explaining it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

"I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the

school." He left.

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the room. His wooden leg and magical eye were lying on the bedside table.

"Is he okay?" Harry asked.

"He'll be fine," said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bed-covers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had bustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

"You'll need to drink all of this, Harry," she said. "It's a potion for dreamless sleep."

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather mattress. Before he could finish the potion, before he could say another word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dimly lit; he was sure it was still nighttime and had a feeling that he couldn't have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

"They'll wake him if they don't shut up!"

"What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have happened, can it?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Bill close by. Mrs. Weasley was on her feet.

"That's Fudge's voice," she whispered. "And that's Minerva McGonagall's, isn't it? But what are they arguing about?"

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva -" Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle!" yelled Professor McGonagall. "When Dumbledore finds out -"

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the door as Bill pulled back the screens, Harry sat up and put his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Weasley angrily. "This is a hospital wing. Minister,

don't you think you'd do better to -"

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

"What has happened?" said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. "Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I'm surprised at you - I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch -"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumble-dore!" she shrieked. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and a hands were balled into fists; she was trembling with fury.-

"When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events," said Snape, in a low voice; he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch -"

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" McGonagall fumed. "I told him you would never allow dementors to set foot inside the castle, but -"

"My dear woman!" roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, "as Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a possibly dangerous -"

But Professor McGonagall's voice drowned Fudge's.

"The moment that - that thing entered the room," she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, "it swooped down on Crouch and - and -"

Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall struggled to find words to describe what had happened. He did not need her to finish her sentence. He knew what the dementor must have done. It had administered its fatal kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He was worse than dead.

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" blustered Fudge. "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths'."

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time. "He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people."

"Why he killed them? Well, that's no mystery, is it?" blustered Fudge. "He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort *was* giving him instructions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said. "Those peoples deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as if he couldn't quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

"You-Know-Who . . . returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore ..."

"As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you," said Dumbledore, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort - learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins - went to free him from his father and used him to capture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return."

"See here, Dumbledore," said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, "you - you can't seriously believe that You-Know-Who - back? Come now, come now . . . certainly, Crouch may have *believed* himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who's orders - but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore ..."

"When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was transported straight to Voldemort," said Dumbledore steadily. "He witnessed Lord Voldemort's rebirth. I will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office."

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, "I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Harry tonight."

Fudge's curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, "You are - er - prepared to take Harry's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth at Fudge.

"Certainly, I believe Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Harry's account of what happened after he touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer."

Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who . . . well..."

Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly understood.

"You've been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge," he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

"And if I have?" he said, looking at Dumbledore. "If I have discovered that you've been keeping certain facts about the boy very quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place -"

"I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?" said Dumbledore coolly.

"You admit that he has been having these pains, then?" said Fudge quickly. "Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly - hallucinations?"

"Listen to me, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, taking a step toward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that indefinable sense of power that Harry had felt after Dumbledore had Stunned young Crouch. "Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe it hurts him when Lord Voldemort is close by, or feeling particularly murderous."

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. ..."

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their

names! Lucius Malfoy -"

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape's eyes flew back to Fudge.

"Malfoy was cleared!" said Fudge, visibly affronted. "A very old family - donations to excellent causes -"

"Macnair!" Harry continued.

"Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!"

"Avery - Nott - Crabbe - Goyle -"

"You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquitted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!" said Fudge angrily. "You could have found those names in old reports of the trials! For heavens sake, Dumbledore - the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too - his tales are getting taller, and you're still swallowing them - the boy can talk to snakes. Dumbledore, and you still think he's trustworthy?"

"You fool!" Professor McGonagall cried. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic!"

"I see no evidence to the contrary!" shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. "It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world - to believe that Voldemort could have risen.

"Voldemort has returned," Dumbledore repeated. "If you accept that fact straightaway. Fudge, and take the necessary measures, we may still be able to save the situation. The first and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors -"

"Preposterous!" shouted Fudge again. "Remove the dementors? I'd be kicked out of office for suggesting it! Half of us only feel safe in our beds at night because we know the dementors are standing guard at Azkaban!"

"The rest of us sleep less soundly in our beds, Cornelius, knowing that you have put Lord Voldemort's most dangerous supporters in the care of creatures who will join him the instant he asks them!" said Dumbledore. "They will not remain loyal to you, Fudge! Voldemort can offer them much more scope for their powers and their pleasures than you can! With the dementors behind him, and his old supporters returned to him, you will be hard-pressed to stop him regaining the sort of power he had thirteen years ago!"

Fudge was opening and closing his mouth as though no words could express his outrage.

"The second step you must take - and at once," Dumbledore pressed on, "is to send envoys to the giants."

"Envoys to the giants?" Fudge shrieked, finding his tongue again. "What madness is this?"

"Extend them the hand of friendship, now, before it is too late," said Dumbledore, "or Voldemort will persuade them, as he did before, that he alone among wizards will

give them their rights and their freedom!"

"You - you cannot be serious!" Fudge gasped, shaking his head and retreating further from Dumbledore. "If the magical community got wind that I had approached the giants - people hate them, Dumbledore - end of my career -"

"You are blinded," said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, "by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! Your dementor has just destroyed the last remaining member of a pure-blood family as old as any - and see what that man chose to make of his life! I tell you now- take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers of Magic we have ever known. Fail to act - and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild!"

"Insane," whispered Fudge, still backing away. "Mad . . ."

And then there was silence. Madam Pomfrey was standing frozen at the foot of Harry's bed, her hands over her mouth. Mrs. Weasley was still standing over Harry, her hand on his shoulder to prevent him from rising. Bill, Ron, and Hermione were staring at Fudge.

"If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I - I shall act as I see fit."

Dumbledore's voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore," he said, waving a threatening finger. "I've given you free rein, always. I've had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I've kept quiet. There aren't many who'd have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without reference to the Ministry. But if you're going to work against me -"

"The only one against whom I intend to work," said Dumbledore, "is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side."

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, "He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be ..."

Snape strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

"There," said Snape harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. This Mark has been growing clearer all year. Karkaroff's too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord's vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold."

Fudge stepped back from Snape too. He was shaking his head. He did not seem

to have taken in a word Snape had said. He stared, apparently repelled by the ugly mark on Snape's arm, then looked up at Dumbledore and whispered, "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He had almost reached the door when he paused. He turned around, strode back down the dormitory, and stopped at Harry's bed.

"Your winnings," he said shortly, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harry's bedside table. "One thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation ceremony, but under the circumstances . . ."

He crammed his bowler hat onto his head and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The moment he had disappeared, Dumbledore turned to look at the group around Harry's bed.

"There is work to be done," he said. "Molly... am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," said Mrs. Weasley. She was white to the lips, but she looked resolute. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper wizarding pride."

"Then I need to send a message to Arthur," said Dumbledore. "All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius."

"I'll go to Dad," said Bill, standing up. "I'll go now."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering at the Ministry -"

"Leave it to me," said Bill.

He clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, kissed his mother on the cheek, pulled on his cloak, and strode quickly from the room.

"Minerva," said Dumbledore, turning to Professor McGonagall, "I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also - if she will consent to come - Madame Maxime."

Professor McGonagall nodded and left without a word.

"Poppy," Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey, "would you be very kind and go down to Professor Moody's office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky in considerable distress? Do what you can for her, and take her back to the kitchens. I think Dobby will look after her for us."

"Very - very well," said Madam Pomfrey, looking startled, and she too left.

Dumbledore made sure that the door was closed, and that Madam Pomfrey's footsteps had died away, before he spoke again.

"And now," he said, "it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius ... if you could resume your usual form."

The great black dog looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an instant, turned back into a man.

Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

"Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled. "It's okay!"

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

"Him!" he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike. "What is he doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost loathing.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope for any us.

Very slowly - but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill - Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly.

"That will do to be going on with," said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. "Now I have work for each of you. Fudge's attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher - the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin's for a while; I will contact you there."

"But -" said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say goodbye again so quickly.

"You'll see me very soon. Harry," said Sirius, turning to him. "I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . of course I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, transformed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the room to the door, whose handle he turned with a paw. Then he was gone.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, "you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared ..."

"I am," said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly after Sirius.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I must go downstairs," he said finally. "I must see the Diggorys. Harry - take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later."

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared. Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him. None of them spoke for a very long time.

"You've got to take the rest of your potion. Harry," Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bedside cabinet as she reached for the bottle and the

goblet. "You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while . . . think about what you're going to buy with your winnings!"

"I don't want that gold," said Harry in an expressionless voice. "You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn't have won it. It should've been Cedric's."

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to overpower him. He could feel a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

"It wasn't your fault. Harry," Mrs. Weasley whispered.

"I told him to take the cup with me," said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother's face, his father's voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window. She was holding something tight in her hand.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Your potion, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him; he fell back onto his pillows and thought no more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN – THE BEGINNING

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the contrary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. Mr. Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs. Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos ... he died just when he'd won the tournament. He must have been happy."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said, "You look after yourself, now."

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

"You take this," he muttered to her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first, you take it -"

But she backed away from him.

"Oh no, it's yours, dear, I couldn't. . . you keep it."

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione

and Ron told him, Dumbledore had spoken to the school that morning at breakfast. He had merely requested that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze. Most people, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had believed Rita Skeeter's article about how disturbed and possibly dangerous he was. Perhaps they were formulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn't care very much. He liked it best when he was with Ron and Hermione and they were talking about other things, or else letting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they didn't need to put into words; that each was waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts - and that it was useless to speculate about what might be coming until they knew anything for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had had with Dumbledore before going home.

"She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this summer," he said. "But he wants you to go back to the Dursleys, at least at first."

"Why?" said Harry.

"She said Dumbledore's got his reasons," said Ron, shaking his head darkly. "I suppose we've got to trust him, haven't we?"

The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, they had those lessons free. They used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Fang bounded out of the open door as they approached, barking and wagging his tail madly.

"Who's that?" called Hagrid, coming to the door. "*Harry!*"

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, "Good ter see yeh, mate. Good ter see yeh."

They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid's cabin.

"Bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe," Hagrid said. "She's jus' left."

"Who?" said Ron curiously.

"Madame Maxime, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"You two made up, have you?" said Ron.

"Dunno what yeh're talkin' about," said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and offered around a plate of doughy cookies, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

"You all righ'?" he said gruffly

"Yeah," said Harry.

"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. "Course yeh're not. But yeh will be."

Harry said nothing.

"Knew he was goin' ter come back," said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "Known it fer years. Harry. Knew he was out there, bidin' his time. It had ter happen. Well, now it has, an' we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Migh' be able ter stop him before he gets a good hold. That's Dumbledores plan, anyway. Great man, Dumbledore. 'S long as we've got him, I'm not too worried."

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"No good sittin' worryin' abou' it," he said. "What's comin' will come, an we'll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me wha' you did. Harry."

Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

"Yeh did as much as yer father would've done, an' I can' give yeh no higher praise than that."

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he'd smiled in days. "What's Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?" he asked. "He sent Professor McGonagall to ask you and Madame Maxime to meet him - that night."

"Got a little job fer me over the summer," said Hagrid. "Secret, though. I'm not s'pposed ter talk abou' it, no, not even ter you lot. Olympe - Madame Maxime ter you - might be comin' with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded."

"Is it to do with Voldemort?"

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

"Migh' be," he said evasively. "Now . . . who'd like ter come an' visit the las' skrewt with me? I was jokin' - jokin'!" he added hastily, seeing the looks on their faces.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the winning House's colors for the Leaving Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers' table. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry couldn't blame him; Moody's fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. Professor Karkaroff's chair was empty. Harry wondered, as he sat down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Voldemort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledores orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why. . . *why* . . . was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk." Was that the job he had taken up again? Had he made contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had been, like Voldemort himself, biding his time?

Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff

table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. Theirs had been the most subdued table before he had gotten to his feet, and theirs were still the saddest and palest faces in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one loud, low, rumbling voice, "Cedric Diggory."

Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at the table as they all sat down again.

"Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff house," Dumbledore continued. "He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about."

Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

"Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence.

"The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so - either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now... or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table. Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore.

"There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedric's death," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to Hogwarts. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured Cedric's, and drank to him. But through a gap in the standing figures. Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical

eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened - of Lord Voldemort's return - such ties are more important than ever before."

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh.

"Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

"It is my belief - and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken - that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

"Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowded entrance hall with the rest of the fourth years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"Arry!"

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds, Harry could see Hagrid helping Madame Maxime to back two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

"We will see each other again, I 'ope," said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. "I am 'oping to get a job 'ere, to improve my Eenglish."

"It's very good already," said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

"Good-bye, 'Arry," said Fleur, turning to go. "It 'az been a pleasure meeting you!"

Harry's spirits couldn't help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her silvery hair rippling in the sunlight.

Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Ron. "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do

the work."

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione. "Could I have a word?" he asked her.

"Oh . . . yes ... all right," said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of sight.

"You'd better hurry up!" Ron called loudly after her. "The carriages'll be here in a minute!"

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to. They returned quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He vos always polite to me. Always. Even though I vos from Durmstrang - with Karkaroff," he added, scowling.

"Have you got a new headmaster yet?" said Harry

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry's hand, and then Ron's. Ron looked as though he was suffering some sort of painful internal struggle. Krum had already started walking away when Ron burst out, "Can I have your autograph?"

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Ron's dress robes to stop him from hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked more fully and freely than they had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore's speech at the Leaving Feast had unblocked him, somehow. It was less painful to discuss what had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort only when the lunch trolley arrived.

When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that she had been carrying in there. Harry looked at it, unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermione, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, "There's nothing in there. You can look for yourself, but there's nothing at all. I've been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the tournament. They didn't even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me. Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet."

"He'll never keep Rita quiet," said Harry. "Not on a story like this."

"Oh, Rita hasn't written anything at all since the third task," said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. "As a matter of fact," she added, her voice now trembling slightly, "Rita Skeeter isn't going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on *her*."

"What are you talking about?" said Ron.

"I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn't supposed to be coming onto the grounds," said Hermione in a rush.

Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself in light of everything else that had happened.

"How was she doing it?" said Harry at once.

"How did you find out?" said Ron, staring at her.

"Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea. Harry," she said.

"Did I?" said Harry, perplexed. "How?"

"*Bugging*," said Hermione happily.

"But you said they didn't work -"

"Oh not *electronic* bugs," said Hermione. "No, you see ... Rita Skeeter" -
Hermione's voice trembled with quiet triumph - "is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn -"

Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out of her bag.

"- into a beetle."

"You're kidding," said Ron. "You haven't... she's not..."

"Oh yes she is," said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them.

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

"That's never - you're kidding -" Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

"No, I'm not," said Hermione, beaming. "I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you'll notice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears."

Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remembered something.

"There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we'd had our conversation by the lake. And unless I'm very much mistaken, Rita was perched on the windowsill of the Divination class the day your scar hurt. She's been buzzing around for stories all year."

"When we saw Malfoy under that tree ..." said Ron slowly.

"He was talking to her, in his hand," said Hermione. "He knew, of course. That's how she's been getting all those nice little interviews with the Slytherins. They wouldn't care that she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid."

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, you see, so she can't transform. And I've told her she's to keep her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever. Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "You caught some pathetic reporter, and Potter's Dumbledore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

"Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at all three of them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledores speech about Cedric. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. His hand gripped his wand under his robes.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff like this!" He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. "Too late now. Potter! They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first! Well - second - Diggory was the f-"

It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, deafened by a series of bangs, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having used a different hex. Nor were they the only ones to have done so.

"Thought we'd see what those three were up to," said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. He had his wand out, and so did George, who was careful to tread on Malfoy as he followed Fred inside.

"Interesting effect," said George, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed. He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face. Well, let's not leave them here, they don't add much to the decor."

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle - each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit - out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry decided to ask them.

"You going to tell us, then?" he said to George. "Who you were blackmailing?"

"Oh," said George darkly. "*That.*"

"It doesn't matter," said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. "It wasn't anything important. Not now, anyway."

"We've given up," said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, "All right, all right, if you really want to know ... it was Ludo Bagman."

"Bagman?" said Harry sharply. "Are you saying he was involved in -"

"Nah," said George gloomily. "Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn't have the brains."

"Well, what, then?" said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, "You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Ron slowly.

"Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he'd caught from the Irish mascots."

"So?"

"So," said Fred impatiently, "it vanished, didn't it? By next morning, it had gone!"

"But - it must've been an accident, mustn't it?" said Hermione.

George laughed very bitterly.

"Yeah, that's what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he'd made a mistake, he'd cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us."

"In the end, he turned pretty nasty," said Fred. "Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn't giving us anything."

"So we asked for our money back," said George glowering.

"He didn't refuse!" gasped Hermione.

"Right in one," said Fred.

"But that was all your savings!" said Ron.

"Tell me about it," said George. "Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan's dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he's in big trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn't enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. Hasn't got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"How?" said Harry.

"He put a bet on you, mate," said Fred. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So *that's* why he kept trying to help me win!" said Harry. "Well - I did win, didn't I? So he can pay you your gold!"

"Nope," said George, shaking his head. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you'd win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the third task."

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again.

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he would never arrive at King's Cross . . . but as he had learned the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

"Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

"Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He *is* mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain. I don't want it and I don't need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams that is."

The twins stared at him.

"Just don't tell your mum where you got it... although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it. . . ."

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they're from you."

He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks.

Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him and whispered in his ear, "I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

"See you, Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Bye, Harry!" said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

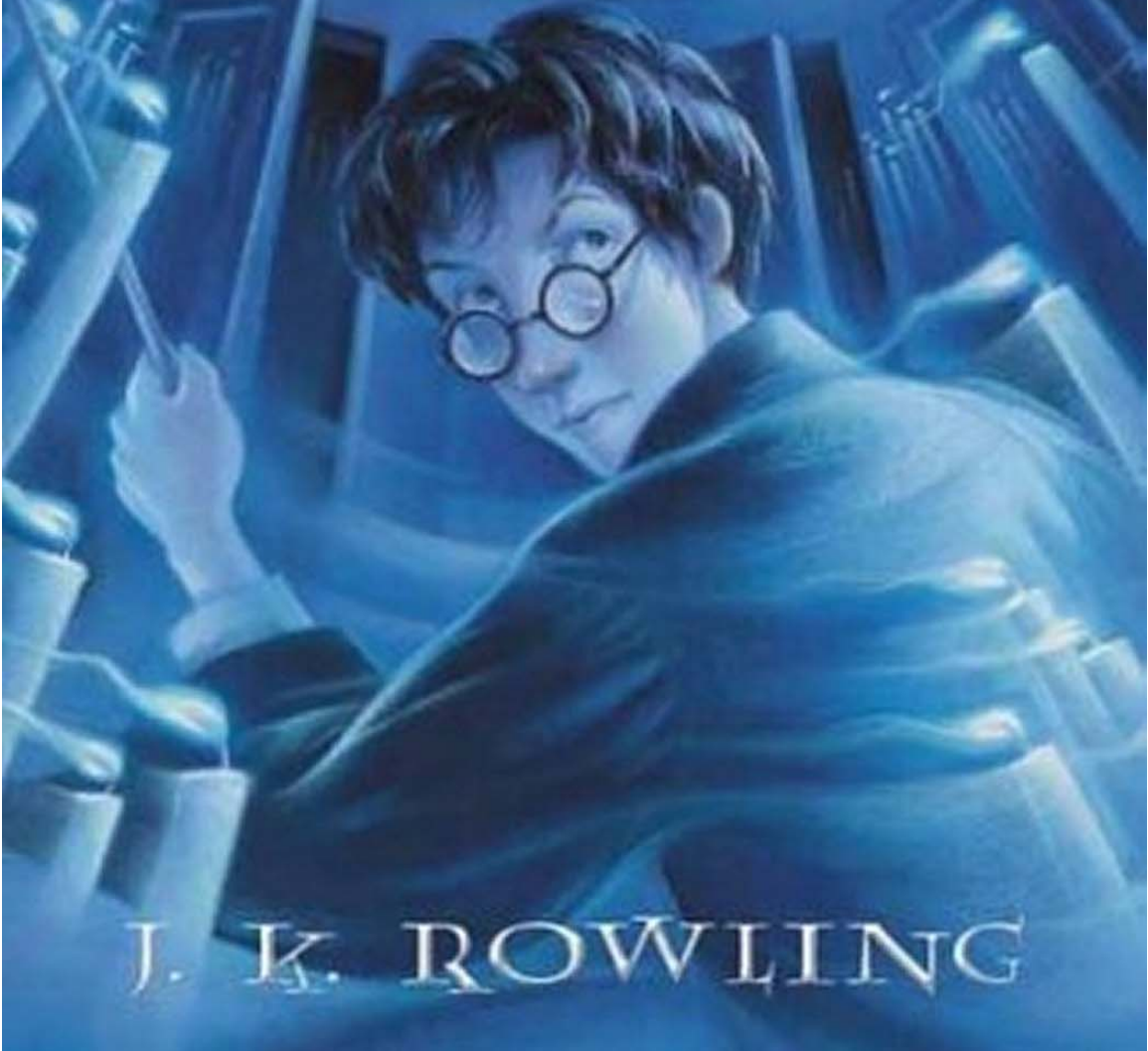
"Harry - thanks," George muttered, while Fred nodded fervently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying yet, he told himself, as he got into the back of the Dursleys' car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come ... and he would have to meet it when it did.

Harry Potter

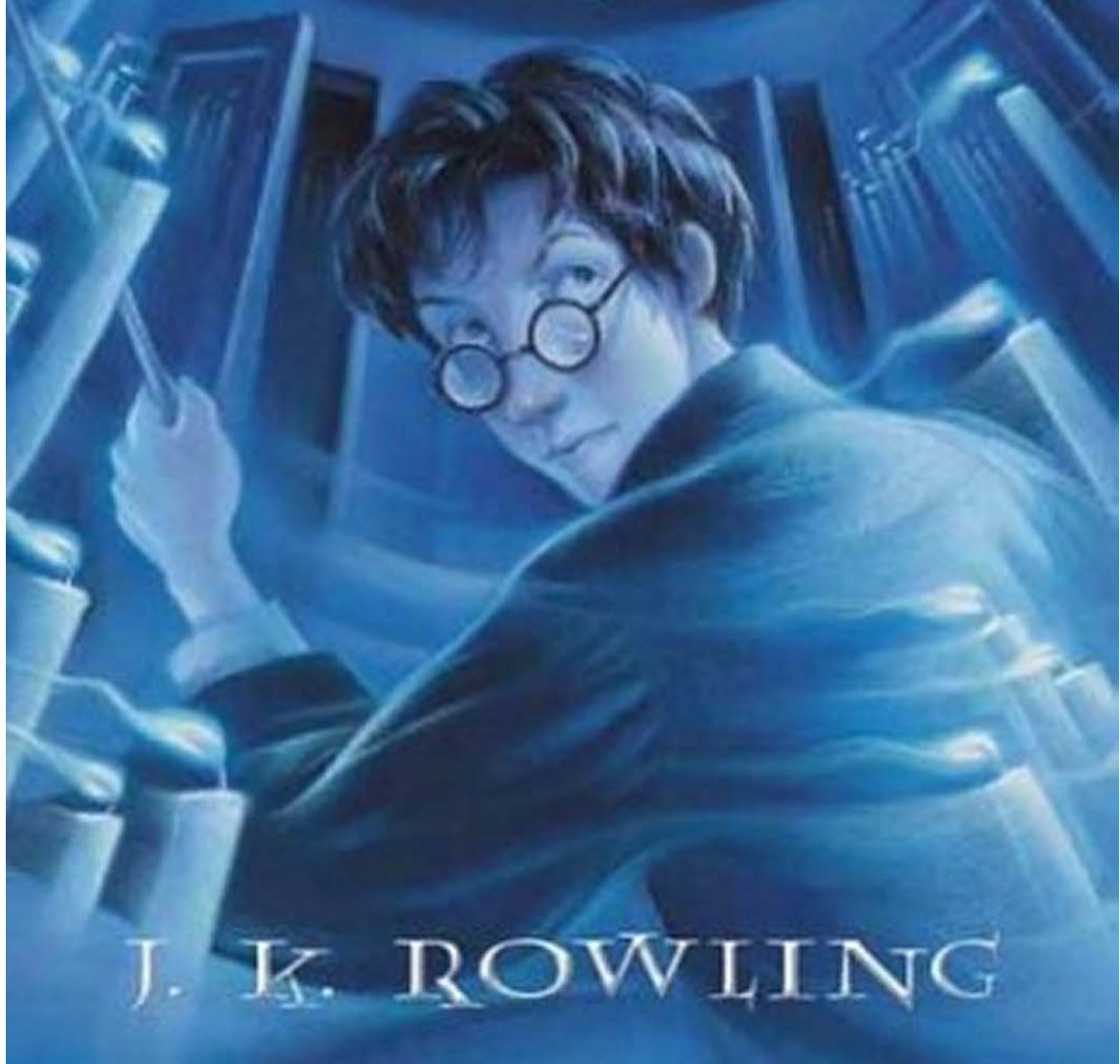
and the Order of the Phoenix



J. K. ROWLING

Harry Potter

and the Order of the Phoenix



J. K. ROWLING

Chapter One

Manual Labor

Harry had planned to sleep late on his first day of summer vacation. He felt as if he needed to sleep for a year after what he'd been through during his fourth year of wizarding training. Harry Potter was possibly the most famous wizard in the world, apart from the dark wizard who had killed his parents. And now he was probably even more famous, having won the Triwizard Tournament just a couple of weeks ago. But he was only famous in the wizarding world; in the non-magical, Muggle world, he was just an annoyance to his aunt and uncle and cousin. He just wanted to sleep late and try to forget everything that had happened to him during the previous ten months.

But instead, he awoke at seven-thirty in the morning to the shouts of workmen, the squeal and grinding of a backhoe, and the shrill voice of his aunt shouting instructions to the workers who had been hired to relandscape the garden at Four Privet Drive, where Harry felt about as welcome as an arsonist in a paper factory. It was impossible to continue to sleep with all the racket, so Harry resigned himself to it and threw back the sheet, sitting on the edge of the bed and fumbling on his bedside table for his glasses. The room came into focus now, littered with wizarding paraphernalia that was spilling out of his trunk, which he had not properly unpacked yet. He rose to walk to the wardrobe and stood looking at his reflection in the mirror on the inside of the door.

He had grown several inches during the previous year, and the bottoms of his pajama pants hovered around his shins. He'd been so busy just trying to stay alive through the Triwizard Tournament that he hadn't even noticed that he now had a full-blown Adam's apple. He tried to sing a little of his school's song, to see how his voice sounded. Traditionally, at Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, everyone sang the school song to a different tune. He was partial to Loch Lomond and started singing, "*I'll take the high road and you'll take the low road...*" but it came out sounding rather like a cross between a garden gnome being sat on by a dragon and a rabid cat being kicked about. He cleared his throat and tried again, managing this time to produce a recognizable tune in a reedy tenor, causing him to be optimistic, but halfway through the first verse, his voice cracked and made a noise that was so startling that his snowy owl Hedwig squawked in her cage and flapped her wings agitatedly.

There was a sudden silence in the garden, and one of the workmen yelled, "What in the hell was *that*?" Harry had hoped that the worker was referring to Hedwig, and not to him, but a second worker now replied, "Cor, Dick, I think it was someone *singing*." Harry grimaced into the mirror; he decided to drop the voice experiments for now and lifted up his hair, examining the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, a mark he'd received as a baby on the night Voldemort killed his parents, and attempted to kill him. He let the hair flop back onto his face. He needed a haircut. When he was younger, he'd always fought against haircuts (his aunt and uncle were endlessly frustrated by his hair), but now he was thinking he needed something that made him look a bit less like a scared little kid (as though it were standing on end because he was afraid) and a lot more like a wizard that a powerful Dark Lord had to take seriously.

He also noticed that there was a dark, downy haze starting to appear on his chin and upper lip and along his jawline. Facial hair! At last! Maybe he would be shaving before the summer was over; he wondered whether there were special charmed razors that wouldn't ever cut a person's skin while shaving. There had to be something; he'd never noticed a single wizard walking about with little tufts of toilet paper stuck to the shaving cuts on his face, like his Uncle

Vernon did every morning. Sometimes they fell off his face at the breakfast table and dropped into his coffee or his food; Harry never said anything when this happened, trying not to grin broadly as he watched his detested uncle eat a spoonful of eggs prominently adorned with a wad of bloody paper, which his uncle did not notice when his face was buried in the morning news. At times like this he would invariably say to Harry's Aunt Petunia, "Petunia! What have you put in the eggs this morning! They're smashing!" And his aunt would look self-satisfied and smug, launching into a discourse about a famous chef she'd seen demonstrating recipes on a chat show. Harry would have to drop his fork and put his head under the table to avoid them seeing the gleeful look on his face, and once he almost choked on his orange juice, trying not to laugh.

The facial hair was nowhere near ready to be shaven, though. It looked more like he hadn't properly washed his face and a dirty film were still on his skin. He looked at his chest in the mirror; he never slept with a shirt on anymore; somehow he had developed a phobia about being strangled in his sleep, and the collars of even V-necked shirts made him feel like his air was being blocked. His chest was pale and flat and hairless, he was still so thin that his ribs showed beneath the skim-milk skin. He tried flexing his muscles; he turned his head to look in the mirror. Ludicrous. In a month he would be fifteen, and he *had* no muscles to flex.

Then he lowered his arms and examined the other Voldemort-related scar he bore; the cut on the inside of his right elbow where Wormtail had taken his blood to add to the cauldron where he was brewing the potion that would resurrect Lord Voldemort. His blood--the blood of a foe-- was the final ingredient needed for Voldemort to get his body back, after bones from his father's grave and flesh from a servant (Wormtail had cut off his own hand and had been rewarded with a new silver one).

Harry shook himself to clear his head, to rid himself of the horrific image of Wormtail writhing on the ground, holding his bloody stump of an arm...

The workmen had started up again, yelling to each other, and, like a descant above their chorus, his aunt harangued them about the way they were doing the work. His uncle's drill plant was doing very well, and he had told Aunt Petunia that she could have the garden redesigned so that she could impress her garden club. She had hired a garden designer, whose plan the workmen were following, but now she was spending all of her time changing her mind about every detail at the last possible moment and driving everyone crazy with the resulting chaos.

Harry put on some shorts and a T-shirt, pulled on his socks and sneakers and went out the door after slipping Hedwig an owl treat. In the kitchen, his uncle was reading the morning paper and preparing to bite down on a bit of bacon that had the requisite bloody paper sitting on the part he was about to put in his mouth. Harry stifled a laugh and thrust his head into the refrigerator to look for food, so no one could see his expression.

Harry sat down at the table with some orange juice and a banana he picked out of a bowl on the counter, then took a piece of buttered toast from a plate on the table. His cousin Dudley was sitting at the table already, almost done his frugal breakfast of yogurt and fruit and a rice cake. He'd been upgraded from grapefruit because he'd actually been pretty good at sticking to his diet at school the previous year. To Harry's eyes he did look noticeably smaller, even a little muscular, rather than like a mound of quivering blanc mange. Since Harry had been home, Dudley had even been reasonably civil to him, helping him carry his trunk up to his room from the car, and bragging about all the weight he'd lost. He didn't ask Harry anything about how his school year was; just prattled on about this girl he wanted to ask out in September, gushing on

about Julia this and Julia that. Harry listened patiently; he wasn't allowed to use magic outside of school, and that's the only thing that probably would have made Dudley shut up. Besides, he would rather listen to Dudley blither about his girlfriend than be on the receiving end of a pounding from him, as happened all too often during his early childhood.

His aunt finally sat down to eat her breakfast, having left the workers in the garden alone for the moment. But the peace of the breakfast table was suddenly shattered by a large barn owl that came flapping in the open window. It landed on Vernon Dursley's chair and prodded him to take two parchments from her right leg, then turned an eye on the rest of his bacon. Annoyed, his uncle got up and backed away from the large bird of prey, yelling, "Harry! What does it want?"

Sighing at his uncle's magic-phobia, Harry went to the owl and removed the parchments, surreptitiously slipping the owl some bacon as he did so. He looked at the parchments; one was addressed to his aunt and uncle and seemed to be written in his godfather's handwriting, and the other was addressed to him, on official Hogwart's stationery. The owl hooted. Having successfully performed her duty and receiving no instructions to wait for a reply to be drafted, she flew back out the open window. Harry heard the workers outside yell in surprise, as he realized they'd done when she'd arrived, but he was too preoccupied to notice before. He handed his uncle the letter from his godfather, Sirius Black, who was a fugitive from justice in the wizarding world because his former friend, Peter Pettigrew (the silver-handed servant of Voldemort known as Wormtail) had successfully framed him for his own murder and the murders of a street full of Muggles (non-magical people). Ever since he had told his aunt and uncle that he had a fugitive wizard for a godfather, the Dursleys had treated him slightly better. His uncle opened the letter and read with an expression that started out as annoyance (time taken out of his day to deal with what he called "Harry nonsense") moved on to perplexed and then surprised and even frightened. Harry had not opened his Hogwart's letter yet; he wondered what Sirius could have written that would make his uncle respond this way. Uncle Vernon thrust the letter at Harry, seeming to be cautious about touching him, as though he were afraid that Harry could do magic on contact. Harry read the letter.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

I am writing to you because I am concerned about Harry. I wish I could have him with me and look after him myself, but as you know, my legal status in the wizarding community makes that impossible; even if I continue to successfully elude the authorities, traveling with the most famous young wizard in the world will make me appear somewhat conspicuous, and will do nothing to enhance Harry's safety. The headmaster of Hogwart's feels that he is safest with you for the summer, but I want to caution you not to make life unduly stressful for him, as he has experienced an inordinate amount of stress this year.

Harry may not have told you about this, because he is very modest, but he is the winner of the Triwizard Tournament that was held at his school this year for the first time in over a century, and he is the youngest winner ever. Another reason he may not tell you this is not modesty, however, but because he does not wish to remember what occurred at the end of the Tournament, when he was transported to a place where the same dark wizard who betrayed his parents was preparing to resurrect the Dark Lord who actually killed them.

Harry experienced horrible things that day, including seeing a fellow schoolmate

killed before his very eyes. He dueled with Lord Voldemort himself and escaped with his life, returning with his schoolmate's body so that his parents could mourn over him and give him a proper burial. He did more than many adult wizards could have--or would have--done, and has made me very proud of him, for his moral strength and integrity as much as his magical ability. All signs point to Harry one day being a very powerful and formidable wizard. Please treat him well--he won't be in school forever.

I will come to accompany Harry to do his school shopping near the end of the summer, and to deliver him to the school train on September the first.

Sirius Black

His uncle looked at him through narrowed eyes. "And just how exactly would everyone recognize you as being the famous Harry Potter?" Harry drew his lips into a straight line and lifted his hair from his forehead to reveal his scar. Vernon drew his own lips into a straight line and muttered, "Oh, right." He sat down in his chair again, now that the owl was no longer sitting on it, and sneered at Harry, "So! You're the hotshot tournament winner! You must think you're God's gift to magic!" Harry was surprised; normally, his uncle avoided the *M* word. But then, he shouldn't be surprised that his uncle was trying to needle him. It was as though he hadn't read the parts of the letter about modesty and trying to forget about Cedric...

Cedric Diggory had been the other Hogwarts champion, *The Real Hogwarts Champion*, proclaimed buttons that some of the students had worn the year before, buttons that, when pressed, proclaimed **POTTER STINKS** in bilious green letters that were supposed to be reminiscent of his eyes (which were more like emeralds). He and Diggory had gone into the final round of the tournament tied for first place. It had been so recent that Harry could still feel the weight of Cedric's lifeless body, could still see the staring expression on his frozen face, the blue eyes forever vacant and unseeing...

Harry grimaced at his uncle but didn't dare say anything; he was biting back rude responses that could mean his being imprisoned in his room for the summer with his magic supplies locked in the cupboard under the stairs again. Just because his uncle was full of himself and never missed an opportunity to brag, he thought everyone was that way. Harry saw that Dudley was actually looking at him with something like grudging respect.

"Well!" his uncle said at last. "Just stay out of my way this summer is all I ask!" He thrust the letter at his wife and left for work, just short of having steam coming out of his ears, as though he had decided after all to take Sirius' advice and had been biting back some choice words of his own. Dudley managed to get the letter from his mother, who had gone to the open window to yell something to the workers again.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was holding a letter of his own and he opened it, unable to stop a grin from creeping across his face as he read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

*(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump,
International Confed. of Wizards)*

Dear Mr. Potter,

As your head-of-house, I am pleased to inform you that I have named you to be a prefect, effective when the new term begins on September the first. This is a responsibility that I know you will not take lightly, as your record speaks for

itself. You will be responsible for other students' conduct when professors are not present and you will be expected to uphold all school rules and regulations to the letter. This is an important leadership position. We expect nothing but the best from our prefects. Both of your parents were prefects, and I know they would be proud of you.

As a prefect, you will have access to certain school facilities that are not available to the general student population, and you will be required to attend regular meetings of all of the prefects in the fifth, sixth and seventh years, which are led jointly by the Head Boy and Head Girl, who will be Roger Davies of Ravenclaw House and Alicia Spinnet of our own Gryffindor House.

Congratulations, Harry! I look forward to welcoming you as a prefect on September the first.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry looked at the accompanying list of new fifth-year prefects.

Gryffindor

Hermione Granger

Harry Potter

Hufflepuff

Hannah Abbot

Ernie MacMillan

Ravenclaw

Mandy Brocklehurst

Evan Davies

Slytherin

Millicent Bulstrode

Draco Malfoy

Malfoy! Harry groaned; he should have known it, though. Of course Snape would pick Malfoy to be a prefect! Severus Snape was the Potions Master and head of Slytherin House. He thought Malfoy could do no wrong; he thought Harry could do nothing right. He wasn't too surprised about the Hufflepuff prefects; he knew Hannah and Ernie from Herbology class, but he didn't know Mandy Brocklehurst at all and only knew that Evan Davies was Roger Davies' brother and also on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

"I'm a prefect," he said simply to his aunt and cousin, trying not to sound too pleased. His aunt grunted.

"You! A prefect!"

Harry could not keep the hurt out of his voice. "My mum and dad were prefects. In fact, my mum and dad were Head Girl and Head Boy."

His aunt looked stern. "I don't want to hear about your parents. Or that--that--school of yours," she said, as though she didn't think *school* were the right word at all.

He took his letter up to his room, bringing some smuggled bacon for Hedwig, and wondering with whom he could share his good news. He thought of his best friend, Ron Weasley, but then, Ron hadn't been named a prefect, so perhaps that wouldn't be especially tactful. He had pretty much forgotten the part of Sirius' letter that mentioned his modesty; he was just bursting, and

wanted to tell *somebody* who would actually be happy about it. He could send a letter to Hermione, who was visiting the Greek Islands with her parents, but she would be getting her own prefect letter and know all about it, if she didn't already. After Greece, the Grangers would all be going up to visit Viktor Krum and his family in Bulgaria. She had met Viktor when he had come with his headmaster from another wizarding school, Durmstrang, to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Viktor had been the champion from his school, and had rescued Hermione from the lake on the school grounds during one of the tournament tasks. Harry would write to Hermione later, on the pretense of congratulating *her* on being named a prefect. Then it hit him: Hagrid! He pulled some parchment and a quill and some ink from his messy trunk and sat down at his desk to write a quick note to Hagrid to tell him he was going to be a prefect; he knew Hagrid wouldn't think he was crowing or putting on airs, he would be genuinely happy for him. Hagrid was one of his best friends, a large half-giant who had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year because he was thought to have opened the Chamber of Secrets (he was framed by Voldemort himself, who fifty years earlier had simply been the student Tom Riddle). After that, he landed the job of gamekeeper at the school, where he'd been ever since. It had been Hagrid who had come to fetch him to Hogwarts when he was eleven and had no idea that he was famous or a wizard or even that his parents had been assassinated by a Dark Lord, not killed in a car accident, as he'd always been told by his aunt and uncle (in an extremely nasty tone of voice, as though it were all their own fault and they richly deserved it).

He finished the note to Hagrid and tied it onto Hedwig's leg, giving her the rest of the bacon before she flew off, hearing another shout go up as the landscapers were alarmed by yet another owl flying about in the daytime. Oops, thought Harry. I shouldn't have done that. Aunt Petunia'll be having kittens...

He wasn't exactly sure where Hedwig was going to find Hagrid, but he was certain that wherever he was she would in fact find him. Harry knew that Dumbledore had sent him to the continent on a diplomatic mission to speak to giants about uniting against Voldemort, now that he was back in power. Voldemort was counting on the giants being on his side, and Dumbledore knew he had better do something to guarantee their loyalty before Voldemort got to them. Dumbledore was also worried that Voldemort would find a way to get to the Dementors and turn them to his side; they were the guards at the wizarding prison Azkaban, where his godfather had been incarcerated (without a trial) for twelve years before his unprecedented escape. Dementors were eerie and had given Harry nightmares at one time; in his third year, when he was learning to fight boggarts (which always turned into whatever the person feared most) his boggart always turned into a dementor. He had learned to fight it by conjuring a Patronus. He had a feeling that these days, if he encountered a boggart, it would no longer turn into a dementor...

He had also inquired whether Hagrid had heard anything about his own mother, Fridwulfa, a giantess with a bloodthirsty reputation who had left him and his father when Hagrid was very young. Giants in general had a very bad reputation, and were credited with some of the worst mass Muggle killings during Voldemort's reign of terror. Harry hoped Dumbledore could in fact make allies of the giants, although he was not so sure that they *should* be on the same side as such murderous creatures. Better than having them on Voldemort's side, he supposed.

After he had sent Hedwig off with Hagrid's letter, he stared around his room, at a loss for what to do, since he wasn't sleeping late after all. He heard another noise in the garden and went over

to the window to look out. The backhoe was digging a rather large hole in the garden for an artificial pond. Harry watched for a few minutes, then decided that he would go out to have a better look. Watching the landscapers seemed like a better idea than just moping around his room wishing he could run and shout, "I'm a prefect! I'm a prefect!" at the top of his lungs. He went out the kitchen door and found an unobtrusive place to sit against the wall of the house while the workmen moved rocks and used surveyor's equipment and consulted lists and other paperwork. They'd been working for about two weeks, according to his aunt and uncle. The garden already looked completely transformed to Harry. After a while, he became restless, and asked Dick, the boss, whether they needed another pair of hands. He felt Dick appraising his thin pale arms. He said, "Ye sure ye're up to it? 'Tis hard work."

Harry assured him he was indeed up to it and set to work moving and lifting whatever they told him to, enjoying the camaraderie of just engaging in manual labor with men he didn't know, who treated him at first as a frail, laughable kid, and then soon gave him a surprising respect, after seeing how hard he was willing to work, and also being surprised at his wiry strength, and by what he was able to do. Maybe I have some muscles after all, thought Harry, carrying a large rock across the garden.

He took lunch with the workers, some of whom removed their shirts in the hot noon sun, or laid back on the ground to absorb the sun's warmth. Harry decided to do the same, leaving himself open to some good-natured jibes about blinding them all with his pallor. In a week, however, his pallor was a thing of the past, and his lack of visible muscles was starting to be a thing of the past, too, as the work began to have a defining effect on his body.

After he'd been working with the landscapers for a week, he was startled by a small garden snake slithering past him while he leaned back and soaked up some sun after lunch. The snake caught his attention because she was talking, and he could understand every word she said. The snake was muttering, "Find a perfectly good home and the next thing you know, it's being rent asunder, great yahoos tromping all over the place, digging up my favorite flower beds..." Even though he had known since he was in his second year in school that he was a Parselmouth (someone who can understand and speak snake language) he didn't often think of it. He seldom had any contact with snakes. He spoke to the snake now, though.

"Sorry about all this. It was my aunt's idea. It may be going on for a few more weeks, I'm afraid."

The snake stopped moving and lifted her head and seemed--if it was possible for a snake to do this--that she had a shocked expression on her face. "What did you say?"

"I said that it was my aunt's idea. Messing up your home like this. If you like, maybe I could help you find some other garden to live in."

"No," the snake said. "What I meant was, I've never been spoken to by a human in my own language before. I hear humans speak Human language. But never mine."

"Oh," Harry said, hissing. "I'm a Parselmouth. I'm going into my fifth year of wizarding school. When I was a baby, a very powerful wizard who was also a Parselmouth tried to kill me and failed, and some of his abilities transferred themselves to me. But I don't get to be around snakes much, so I tend to forget I can do it."

"I have heard of wizards, and I have heard legends of wizards who could speak Parseltongue, but I never believed it."

"Well, it's pretty rare. One time I talked to a boa constrictor. He told me he'd never been to Brazil. He lived in the zoo, but I accidentally freed him."

“What is a boa constrictor?” she asked. She paused. “They are looking at you,” the snake suddenly informed him, before she went slithering off into a bush. Harry looked up to see the entire crew gaping at him as though he’d gone mad. After a minute, he realized that they hadn’t actually heard what he’d been saying to the snake; they’d only heard hissing. Even to his own ears, when he spoke in Parseltongue, it sound like just so much hissing, although his brain then converted the hissing sounds into words. He could only actually speak Parseltongue when he was confronted with a snake. He smiled sheepishly at them.

“Well, you’ve got to speak to them in their own language,” he said, shrugging. There was perplexed silence at first, then Dick rearing back his head in unrestrained laughter, which was the signal for the others that they were allowed to do that too. Harry laughed with them. Well, he was telling the truth; he was speaking to the snake in her own language. While he was working that afternoon, he kept an eye out for her, but didn’t see her. He was sleeping soundly every night, rolling into bed exhausted from the work, his muscles aching, but at least now he had some muscles. And his skin wasn’t the color of parchment anymore, either. He was glad to have the physical activity to take his mind off Voldemort.

Very early the next morning, before anyone was up, he finally gave in to the temptation to write to Hermione about being a prefect, and she apparently had also succumbed to this temptation, as her owl arrived in Harry’s bedroom about five minutes after Hedwig left to give his letter to her.

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on being a prefect! Of course I had really hoped that I would get to be one, and I had a feeling that, out of the fifth-year boys, it would be you.

Harry hoped she didn’t tell Ron that; he was very touchy about competing with his older brothers, two of whom had been prefect and then Head Boy.

Mum and Dad and I are having a great time in the Greek Islands. In a couple of weeks we’re going up to Bulgaria to visit Viktor’s family. They live in Sofia, the capital. Maybe Viktor can help me improve my broomstick technique. He’s gotten a job as reserve Seeker with--guess what team? The Chudley Cannons!

Ron should be pretty happy about that!

Harry strongly suspected that Ron would be *torn* about that; he had been pretty agitated about Hermione and Viktor Krum going to the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, and only at the end of the term had he given in to his impulse to ask Krum for an autograph. Krum had been the star of the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer. Quidditch was a wizarding sport played on broomsticks, and Harry played Seeker on his house team at school. He looked down and finished reading Hermione’s letter.

So, since Viktor will be working in England, he can meet me in Hogsmeade on weekends when we’re allowed to go down to the village. You don’t think they’ll cancel Hogsmeade visits now that You-Know-Who is back, do you?

Here’s a photo of me and my parents at the Parthenon. Next we’re going on to Corfu. Please take care of yourself and tell Dumbledore and Sirius right away about your scar hurting or anything else that could indicate dark magic. Missing you.

Love from Hermione

Harry looked at the photo she had enclosed; it was a Muggle picture, no moving people in it. Hermione stood with her parents in front of a large Greek temple, both of them with their arms

around her, their little girl who was not so little anymore. She was wearing a very tight sleeveless white top and a matching skirt that was very brief. Her exposed arms and legs were already very brown, and then he noticed that she'd cut her hair; it was rather short, curling all over her head in a free and yet much more orderly way than it usually did. The shorter haircut seemed to work much better with her hair's natural wave, and he almost didn't recognize her at first. But after squinting at it for a moment, he could tell from the nose and shape of the face and the way she smiled that it was her. She wore dark glasses against the glaring Greek sun and looked quite happy, enjoying a trip to the Greek Islands with her folks. Harry caught his breath for a moment and thought, I just hope they're safe. What if Voldemort tries to get to her while she's traveling? Harry had mentioned to Sirius that he was concerned that Voldemort would try to coerce him to do his bidding by coming after Ron and Hermione. Sirius agreed that that was a danger, but he took a wait-and-see attitude, and promised to discreetly check in on each of them during summer vacation.

Then he looked up in surprise as Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, flew in with a letter. Ron's owl was very small and could be held in the palm of one's hand, and he was also very excitable, yet not dreadfully useful for owl post because he couldn't handle anything really big. Pig fluttered frantically around the room for a minute, while Harry tried to snag him and grab the letter he was delivering. When he finally had the letter in his hand he sat down on the bed to read it.

Dear Harry,

Well, congratulations on being a prefect. Hermione wrote and told me. Can you believe Malfoy got chosen too? He'll be even more of an insufferable git than he was before--if that's possible.

Did you know that Hermione is going to visit Krum? And that he's going to play for the Cannons? I feel like I'm in prison; we never go anywhere. That trip to Egypt a couple of years ago was a contest we won. And now we don't even have the excuse of going to Romania or Egypt to visit Charlie or Bill because they're taking time off work and staying here for a while. Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea. And yet SHE gets to flit around the Greek Islands and visit a wizard who just graduated from a school where they actually TEACH the dark arts!

Anyway, Sirius said he's going to fetch you at the end of the summer and bring you here on the Knight Bus. Then we can go shopping from here using floo powder. Dad's getting Ministry cars to take us to the train on September first. I can't believe you have to stay with the Muggles until then! But Dumbledore says that's for the best too.

I haven't heard from Hagrid, have you? I'm not sure whether I want him to find his mum or any of the other giants. I'd settle for them to just stay in the mountains and not get involved in a wizard war at all. How's your scar? No pain, I hope. Write to me and tell me what you want for your birthday. See you in August. ---Ron

Harry put the letters away and propped the photo on a shelf. He gave Pigwidgeon an owl treat and sent him on his way. It was early in the morning and he needed to get dressed and down to the garden to get back to work. It was very satisfying, somehow, the way the landscaping was coming together. Harry could have been quite happy to go into work like this, if he had never discovered he was a wizard. He tried to imagine a life of being a Muggle, being completely

ignorant of the wizarding world...but he couldn't. His life was so different now from the way it was before his eleventh birthday, it was as though those pre-magic years were lived by someone else.

After grabbing a quick breakfast, Harry went out into the garden. It was very early, so no one else had shown up yet, and Harry started moving rocks about. After about half an hour, Dick came walking up the path from the street, alone. Harry looked up in surprise.

"Morning, Harry."

"Morning, Dick. Where's everyone else?"

Dick looked about sixty, but Harry was just guessing; he was as brown and leathery as you could hope a gardener to be, with silvery hair swept back from his face and kind blue eyes. Harry was sometimes reminded of Dumbledore when he saw him. Dick put his hand on his chin now and looked as if he were reluctant to deliver some bad news.

"Well, the thing of it is, we've gotten another job, and they're payin' double for it to be done quick. Plus, your aunt has--well, made my men reluctant to work here anymore." He paused and looked around the incomplete garden. "But, we do have a contract, so I'll stay on here and continue this job, and a few times a day I'll check in with my men on the other job. You still want to help me, Harry?"

Harry smiled at him and nodded. "Of course. I've been enjoying myself."

Dick sighed and looked his age for once. "Some's have the right to do it just for enjoyment; some's have to do it to make a living."

Harry flushed, thinking of all the gold in his vault at the wizarding bank, Gringott's. Ron was touchy about money, too, and was upset with Harry for not telling him that some leprechaun gold he'd given Harry had disappeared the following day; leprechaun gold was apparently not permanent.

So he and Dick got to work on the garden, and things slowed down considerably. Harry didn't mind, though; he wasn't especially fond of working with a crowd. After it had been just the two of them for several days, it seemed like it had always been like that. It was very comfortable working with Dick; he wasn't much of a talker. They ate lunch together companionably in the sunshine, then Dick laid back against a pile of potting soil bags for a little nap. Harry took off his shirt and leaned back too, basking in the sun. When it was time to get back to work, Harry put on his shirt again and picked up the trash from the lunch to take it inside. As he was going in the kitchen door, he heard a hissing voice say, "*The rocks will fall. The rocks will fall. The rocks will fall...*"

Harry looked around, perplexed. There was a pile of rocks in the corner of the garden waiting to be used around the artificial pond. Harry squinted around the garden, looking for the snake he'd talked to before. He couldn't see her. Saying, "Hmmm," to himself, he carried the trash into the kitchen. As he was coming back outside again, Dick went over near the rock pile to select a small shrub with sacking around its roots to plant near the back door.

Harry was probably a good fifty feet away when it happened; there was nothing he could have done. The rocks came clattering down, knocking Dick onto his side and then shattering his left leg. Harry ran around the various obstacles in his path to try to reach him. Dick was lying on the ground with a huge mound of stones on him, sweat running down his face, looking like he wanted to scream and holding it back. Harry reached him, remembering breaking his leg during the Triwizard Tournament. And once, he'd had to grow back all of the bones in his arm after a Quidditch match. But he didn't have access to magical medicine here, or even enough magic to

help his friend get out from under the pile of rocks. Harry felt like he was in a trance as he worked swiftly to move all of the rocks, one by one, off poor Dick, who was looking ashen under his tan, biting his lip and breathing raspily. Two weeks before, Harry would have had trouble moving any one of the rocks he was practically tossing aside now, with no regard for where they were landing (a number of carefully-placed plants were crushed and would have to be replaced). While he worked, he yelled for his aunt and cousin to call for an ambulance. They finally appeared at the kitchen door as Harry was removing the last few rocks from Dick's body.

Harry grasped Dick's hand while the paramedics set his leg and rolled him onto a stretcher so they could carry him to the ambulance. He watched the ambulance drive off, and he tried not to feel responsible, but it was difficult. He'd heard the warning, and he'd done nothing; he disregarded it. He was sure it had been a snake's voice he'd heard, the same snake he'd talked to before. He didn't quite hear his aunt complaining bitterly about the work not getting done, and ranting about the plants Harry had crushed. Harry moved about in a daze, ignoring her at first, then facing her stonily and said, "I'll do it." She looked at him through shrewd, narrowed eyes, eyes that wondered what he was up to. "If you pay me," he added. He tried to come up with an amount he knew his aunt couldn't refuse--he mustn't get too greedy. "Five pounds a day," he said, drawing himself up to his full height of five-feet six-inches, looking her in the eye. He was as tall as her now.

She narrowed her eyes even more, looking for the catch, but it was a low enough amount that even she couldn't argue. She agreed and went back into the house, leaving Harry to look around the garden helplessly, feeling guilty and alone. He swept his eyes over the entire garden quickly, but he didn't see the snake, so he tried calling softly, "Here snake, here snake..." but it sounded like English; he wasn't speaking Parseltongue. She must not be nearby, he thought. He worked for the rest of the afternoon alone, stacking the rocks in the corner more securely, and assessing the damage from his having thrown them about to remove them from Dick.

He collected five pounds from his aunt at the end of the day, making himself a sandwich for dinner and then rolling into bed early, aching all over. Now, every day, he got up with the sun, showered and dressed, and went out to the garden to continue his solitary labor. A few days after Dick's leg was crushed, Harry was basking in the sun after eating lunch when he heard a hissing voice near him.

"How is your friend? Why did you not tell him about the rocks?"

Harry looked around, then saw the snake near his feet. She was about twenty inches long and dull green, with glittering eyes and vertical pupils, like a cat's. "He'll be okay. I--don't know why I didn't tell him. I didn't realize that--that--"

"That snakes have the Sight?" she hissed softly. Harry nodded. His least favorite class at school was Potions, because he couldn't stand Professor Snape. But at least he did feel that Potions were useful, that he was learning something important. He thought that his most useless class was Divination. Professor Trelawney seemed to enjoy spending every class predicting Harry's untimely death. According to her, he was supposed to have died dozens of times over by now. Harry had never seen anything while staring in a crystal ball or at a lump of tea leaves in a teacup, and he tended to make up things when doing star charts.

Now, though, Harry was confronted by the possibility that the snake was telling the truth. And since very, very few humans could understand snake language, who would be in a position to know that snakes could predict the future? Even he hadn't believed her; he was as sorry as he

could be about that.

“If you have the Sight,” Harry said to her, “tell me: will Voldemort be stopped?”

“Who?” the snake hissed. “You do not understand. I can only see a few minutes into the future, and only what is right around me. I cannot predict events happening far away. And I get only a glimpse of the future; the larger a snake is, the further into the future her sight reaches, and the farther distant.”

Harry had a sudden thought. “Would you like to come to school with me in September? It’s up north, and cold, but I could—I could--” Harry floundered, then had a brainstorm. “I could wear you wrapped around my arm to absorb my body heat! You could be my pet snake!”

She looked at him. “What is ‘pet?’ I do not understand.”

“Well,” Harry said, “humans sometimes choose some animals to take care of and give them names and bring them into their houses to live with them. Those animals are their pets.”

The snake hissed at him, “I am not a pet. If I go with you, it will be my choosing, not yours. What is a name?”

“Well,” Harry said again, “my name is Harry Potter. It’s what people call you...” he trailed off, unable to put the concept of names into words.

“I thought you were called ‘lazy git,’” said the snake. Harry realized she had heard his aunt addressing him.

“No, no, that’s not the same as my name. That’s called an insult. It’s to be mean. Let’s see, you predicted the future and I didn’t believe you, so I’ll name you--Cassandra.”

“Why?”

“Because there was this seeress in Greek mythology named Cassandra who was blessed with being able to predict everything about the future, but cursed to have no one believe her.” The snake did not reply; he wondered whether any of what he had just said made sense to her. “But Cassandra is a little long to say all the time, so I’ll just call you Sandy for short.”

“For short what?”

Harry was starting to get a little impatient with the snake; just because you could talk to snakes, he thought, didn’t mean you could really talk to them. “For a nickname. A nickname is like a shorter version of your name.”

“What is your nickname?”

“Well, I guess it’s Harry,” he said, never having considered it before. He’d never seen his birth certificate. Was his real name Harold? Or Harrison? Or it could be that his whole name was just plain Harry. He had no idea.

“But that is your name.”

“I know.” Now Harry was really tired of explaining concepts to the snake that every human just knew. He wanted to get back to work. He put his shirt back on, shivering; some clouds had passed in front of the sun.

“Harry Potter,” the snake said suddenly.

“Yes, Sandy?” Harry said, trying out her new name.

“I want to try your arm.”

“What?”

“The sun is hidden. I am cold. You talked about wearing me on your arm. I am very cold.”

He picked her up, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin, and carefully wrapped her twice about his upper left arm. She adjusted her tail and settled her chin on it, letting out an audible sigh.

Harry smiled. She didn’t weigh more than a few ounces; no wonder she can only see a short

distance into the future, he thought.

Harry worked the rest of the day with her wrapped about his arm, and they talked every so often. He tried to speak simply and clearly to her, as though she were a little dim, but he tried not to be insulting. He didn't want to confuse her about human concepts she'd never been exposed to before. She seemed to be trying to speak simply to him too, as though he were not quite bright enough to understand otherwise. When he was having trouble lifting a very heavy rock--not one that had fallen on Dick--she told him she had heard the other workers telling each other to lift with their legs.

Harry looked down at his legs, which were still rather thin, although they were at least tanned now. "I can't," he said. "They're not strong enough."

"Make them stronger," she said simply. Harry thought about this. Yes; he could take up running. That would make his legs stronger.

But he was far too exhausted to run at the end of the day; he just needed dinner and sleep. So he decided that first thing in the morning, he would go running, before beginning work in the garden. He also decided that he knew what he wanted for his birthday: a book about performing magic using snakes. He had heard that some powerful dark magic could be done with snakes; maybe some things could be done that *weren't* dark magic. He would ask Sirius about it.

He went to bed that night feeling like this wasn't such a bad summer after all. He'd spent the previous year becoming stronger magically, for the tournament, and now he was becoming stronger physically and also making use of some of his more arcane abilities. And if it helped him fight Voldemort, maybe he *should* learn some dark magic; Voldemort wouldn't be expecting that, or a snake of his own...

Harry picked up the picture of Hermione and her parents and looked at it while lying in bed, preparing to go to sleep. I won't let anything happen to you, he thought fiercely. Or Ron. I won't. Voldemort will have to come through me and Sandy to get you.

Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent

Chapter Two

Training Dudley

The next morning, Harry got up even earlier than usual and dressed in shorts and a singlet and sneakers to go running. He drank two glasses of water before going, but did not eat anything yet. At first he felt fine, his feet pounding on the sidewalk as he passed house after house, the lawns dewy and moist-smelling. But after a few blocks, he was winded, unused to the pace he was attempting. He pushed on, nonetheless, until he reached the park that was about a half-mile from the house, then turned around and ran half-heartedly back home, feeling every moment as though his heart would burst.

He finally arrived back at Four Privet Drive, sweat running down his face and his legs wobbling with every step, as though he'd just learned to walk. He staggered up the stairs to the bathroom for a shower, collapsing in a heap in the corner of the stall while the water beat down on him. For the next week, he didn't get much done in the garden; running in the mornings had him all done in, and he felt like he was just dragging himself around the rest of the day. By Saturday, his aunt and uncle were complaining about how slowly the work was going, and Harry actually didn't blame them; he felt that if he were moving any slower, he'd be going backwards.

“Sorry,” he said at dinner, barely able to keep his head from falling into his plate. “I’ve been trying to build up my stamina by running in the mornings. I only just started, so I’m not really there yet. But I’ll work over the weekend too, don’t worry...”

He was startled by a light coming into his aunt’s eyes. “Is *that* what you’ve been doing? Running!” He could virtually see the little wheels in her head spinning around. “In that case, you have another job--unpaid, I might add. You can be Dudley’s trainer!”

Dudley looked up from his celery sticks and lettuce; the rest of them had pork chops and potatoes and buttered beans. Harry and Dudley looked at each other, equally horrified.

“But Mum--”

“But Aunt Petunia--”

“But nothing!” his aunt declared. “You start tomorrow!”

Harry and Dudley both grimaced, looking warily at each other. There’d been an uneasy detente in the house since Harry’s return, but that didn’t mean they wanted to do things together, especially running every morning. Harry had in fact been getting better and better every morning. That day he had run back and forth to the park twice, keeping a good steady pace the whole time and feeling more energized at the start of his work day than winded. It was starting to work. He had also learned about warming up and warming down before and after running from a report on the evening news, and he wasn’t cramping up now, as he had on his third day out. The next morning, he knocked on Dudley’s door after he had gotten dressed. There was no answer. Harry turned the knob and entered.

Dudley was still in bed, fast asleep. Harry looked around his room; Dudley’s room was a dream for any fifteen-year-old boy. He had two televisions and video recorders, a state-of-the-art stereo system, a computer with a twenty-inch screen and about a hundred computer games. He had every CD he wanted, every video he wanted (some, Harry noted, were *very* racy) and there wasn’t a book in sight. He looked through Dudley’s dresser for something he could wear to run, and found some sneakers and socks too. Then he shook Dudley roughly.

“Wake up, you! Your mum wants us to go running, so we’re going running!” Harry never wasted his breath being polite to Dudley, as he did with his aunt and uncle; that was just for self-preservation. Dudley rolled over and opened his eyes, looking alarmed. Then he closed them again, covering his head with his pillow.

“Geroff! Go away! This is a nightmare!”

Harry pulled the pillow off his face and threw back the covers. He put his face about an inch from Dudley’s and tried to sound like a drill sergeant he’d seen once in an American movie about the army.

“Get up, you git! You are going *running*!”

Dudley tried to swat him away, but Harry was too fast; he sprang across the room, jogging lightly in place near the door.

“If you want to whomp me you’ll have to catch me!”

Dudley grunted and reluctantly pulled on the clothes Harry had gotten out for him and tied his sneakers. Then Harry turned and ran out the door and down the steps, feeling the entire staircase shuddering as Dudley angrily followed him. Harry opened the front door and sprinted down the front walk, Dudley following after he’d shut the door.

After he’d passed a couple of houses, Harry realized he wasn’t hearing another set of footsteps behind him anymore. He turned, jogging in place again to keep up his heartrate, and saw that Dudley was standing in front of the house next door to Number Four, his head in the vicinity of

his knees, panting and already dripping with sweat.

Harry jogged back to Dudley, then simply hopped up and down next to him, waiting silently. After a couple of minutes, Dudley straightened up and Harry nodded at him, still jogging in place.

“Right then,” he said to Dudley. “Ready to go on?” Dudley nodded grimly, no longer attempting to whomp Harry, but seemingly determined to do anything his skinny cousin could do. And possibly, Harry thought, considering his chances with Julia in September...

Harry slowed down some, although he still was literally running rings around Dudley. He would jog forward about a half-block, then jog back to Dudley, stay by his side for another half-block until the pace started to frustrate him too much, then sprint forward again, only to backtrack once more to be by Dudley’s side again. When they finally reached the park, Dudley just wanted to collapse on the grass, but Harry wouldn’t let him.

“Stretching now,” he told him. “Should have done it before we left, but now will do. Otherwise you’ll cramp up.” He demonstrated for Dudley, who gamely tried all of it, even reaching for his toes (he wasn’t even close). Harry nodded at him, surprised that he was doing as well as he was. He wouldn’t have thought Dudley would be able to do half of what he had, let alone do it without constant whining.

After the stretching, Harry told him to get up for the run back. Dudley did better this time; he and Harry actually jogged side by side much of the way back to Privet Drive, although Harry felt as though he were holding himself back. When they reached the front gate, Harry told him they had to do warm-down stretches, and Dudley nodded, red-faced and panting, complying without a word. When they were done, they rose to enter the house and Harry simply slapped Dudley on the back, giving him a small smile. Dudley gave a tired smile back, but it seemed to be a great effort, and it ceased quickly as Dudley closed his eyes and staggered up the stairs to the bathroom for a shower. As Harry watched him go, it seemed to him that in the time it had taken them to run to the park and back, something had somehow changed between them. He wiped his sweat from his forehead with his arm as he walked to the kitchen, then turned on the faucet at the sink, bent his head under it, and proceeded to drink directly from the tap.

After a week, Dudley was actually running by Harry’s side every morning, although Harry was still going slower than he would have liked, and sometimes sprinted ahead and then back to Dudley again. He usually drank a good deal of water and had some food while Dudley showered, then took his turn. He was so busy working on training Dudley and doing the landscaping seven days a week that his birthday crept up on him.

On the morning of July thirty-first, Dudley came into Harry’s room to wake him up, instead of the other way around, as was their usual routine. It was a Monday morning, bright and humid, and Harry was particularly tired because he’d stayed up late reading for his History of Magic summer homework, and writing a parchment and a half about Dumbledore defeating Grindelwald in 1945 (Grindelwald had been on the Axis side during World War II, no surprise there). Harry couldn’t tell whether Dumbledore was actually being credited with ending the war by bringing Grindelwald down, but it wouldn’t have surprised him in the least. Hitler was known to have more than a passing interest in magic and the supernatural, and Harry knew that all of the most important Allied victories occurred after Dumbledore had taken care of the dark wizard.

Harry groaned and looked up at Dudley much as Dudley had done on their first day of training, only to see his pillow coming down on his face. “Hey!” he yelled as Dudley pressed it down on

him, then managed to worm his way off the bed, falling on the floor with a thud. Dudley threw the pillow onto the bed, laughing.

“You should have seen your face!” he howled. Then he pulled a package from behind his back and tossed it onto the bed. “Happy Birthday, Harry.” Harry looked up at him from the floor, in shock. He had never in his life received a birthday gift from his cousin. He pulled himself back up onto the bed and opened the wrappings, which had concealed a portable tape player and headphones, and there was already a tape in it. It was good to go.

Harry smiled at Dudley. “Thanks, Dud.” He looked at the tape in the player; it was some Goth band. “Goth?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Just because I’m a wizard?”

Dudley shrugged. “It’s all I could think of. It’s not new. Neither is the tape player; it’s an extra one. I don’t need three.” Even though Dudley was admitting that he had made a minimal effort to get him a birthday present, Harry appreciated it. It was more than his aunt and uncle had ever done. Just as they were about to leave, a sudden flurry of owls came in the window. Harry had sent Hedwig to Sirius several days before, with a letter asking about spellbooks for using snakes in magic, and now she was returning with his present and a card. Harry started to open it, but then a medium-sized brown owl flew in with a package unmistakably bearing Hermione’s handwriting, followed by Pigwidgeon hauling a package far too large for him and a frightening eagle owl that Harry suspected had brought something from Hagrid, who had given Hedwig to him as his first birthday gift ever, when he was eleven.

Dudley backed up into a corner, alarmed by the four owls flying around the room, but trying to look composed. Harry took the packages from them, one by one, gave each of them owl treats, and sent each of them on their way except for Hedwig, who settled down into her cage for a nap. Harry tore the paper off Sirius’ package first. He set the card up on a shelf and then looked at the large book in his hands: *Sorcerers, Serpents and Snakes* by Colleen Colubra. Inside, Sirius had inscribed it: “*Dear Harry--Happy Fifteenth Birthday! From your godfather,*”; and there followed a scrawl wherein Harry could vaguely make out an S and a B, but which was otherwise illegible. Harry started to page through the book, grinning. This looked like it might have *something* useful in it. He wanted to start reading it right away, but instead he forced himself to move on to Hagrid’s package. It had some kind of very sweet-smelling pastry with honey and walnuts in it, which Hagrid identified as a Ukrainian version of baklava. “...not that I’m saying I’m in Ukraine...” Hagrid’s note said. Harry smiled. Hagrid was terrible at keeping secrets.

Next he opened Ron’s package. After setting another card up on the shelf above his desk, he found a cake sent by Ron’s mother, a box of Honeydukes sweets, and a belt with two entwined snakes for a buckle, and a narrow holster attached to it for his wand. Sirius has been talking, Harry thought. Then he noticed that there was another card and a small bundle in the bottom of the Weasley parcel. The card was from Ginny, saying simply, “Happy Birthday, Harry. Love, Ginny.” He opened the accompanying paper-wrapped lump and found a small amulet on a silver-colored chain. The amulet was shaped like a basilisk, and it had small glowing green eyes. He smiled upon seeing it, and immediately put it around his neck. Dudley took the card and read it, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

“Love, Ginny, huh?”

Harry grimaced, not feeling up to explaining Ginny and the basilisk to Dudley. Finally, he opened Hermione’s package, which he could already tell--no surprise there--was another book. Sirius had definitely been talking, for it was a thick text on the care and feeding of snakes.

As Harry opened the card, a photograph went fluttering onto the floor. Harry read the card while Dudley stooped to pick up the photo.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I hope you find this useful. Sirius said you might. Here's another photo, this time on Corfu. Now we're off to Bulgaria. Sirius will be accompanying us, posing as our dog. It seemed like the best plan of action. Mum is still a bit alarmed whenever he becomes human again; I think she prefers his canine form. Hope to see you in Diagon Alley! I'll say hello to Viktor for you.

Thinking of you.

Love from Hermione

Harry smiled at the thought of Hermione's parents coping with Sirius changing into a large black dog and back again as the mood struck him. Her parents weren't in the least bit magical; they were dentists, but they had accepted their daughter's status as a witch with equanimity, putting aside their dreams of her one day going to medical school (as Hermione had assumed she would from the age of six).

Harry looked up at Dudley, who was holding the photograph he'd picked up from the floor. Harry could see that on the back of the photo, Hermione had written *Happy Birthday Harry, With Love From Hermione*. Dudley's jaw was hanging open stupidly. He swallowed. "Is she your girlfriend?"

Harry sighed; he'd had to contend with that question much of the previous year, when it had even been reported as fact in the wizarding newspaper *The Daily Prophet*. "No, we're just friends. She's one of my two best friends. Boy, people think just because a girl and boy are friends..."

"She's not a girl," Dudley interrupted.

Harry frowned at him. What was in the picture, anyway? Dudley was holding it very tightly; his knuckles were white. "Of course she's a girl, what are you on about?"

"Nope," Dudley insisted. "She's a woman." He handed the photo to Harry, and now it was Harry's turn to let his jaw drop.

Hermione was alone in the picture this time, instead of with her parents. She was on a sunny beach, leaning back on her hands for support, with one tanned leg extended straight out, the other one with the knee raised. All she was wearing was a black crocheted bikini. It was a *very small* black crocheted bikini. Harry was floored. Hermione had so much--*skin*. She wore dark glasses again, as in the Parthenon picture, but she wasn't smiling this time; she looked rather serious. Harry felt his mouth go dry.

From what seemed like a million miles away, Harry heard Dudley's voice saying, "Are you sure she's not your girlfriend?" Harry looked up at him, startled, then placed the photo on the shelf carefully, next to the other one.

"Yeah," he croaked; his voice had almost finished changing, but not quite. Dudley shook his head, turning to go.

"Idiot..." he heard his cousin muttering as he left the room. Harry fingered the basilisk around his neck and looked again at the picture of Hermione on the beach, her glowing skin, her hair a riot of shining curls, brown touched by gold, unmistakably now a woman and no longer a girl. He thought of her going to Bulgaria, and suddenly he understood Ron's annoyance with Viktor Krum.

After he and Dudley went running, Dudley let him have the first shower. Harry was taking the

day off from gardening after that, though. He sat down to look at the books from Sirius and Hermione, and he let Dudley try some of the Every Flavor Beans Ron had sent (Dudley was fine when he got blueberry, treacle tart and even fish and chips, but recoiled when he got one that tasted unmistakably like furniture polish).

Periodically through the day, Harry looked up at the photos on his shelf, hoping Hermione was okay, and touching the amulet Ginny had sent, silently wishing for Ron and Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys to be safe, too.

At dinner, Dudley sounded rather pointed as he asked Harry whether he had had a happy birthday, and whether he'd had chance to try out his tape player. "If you want a different tape, just look in my room and take whatever you like," he added.

Harry thanked him and said that he hadn't tried it yet, but he thought he would tomorrow, while he was working in the garden. He didn't know yet quite what was coming. Now Dudley turned to his parents, saying, "So! What did *you* get Harry for his birthday?"

Harry's Aunt Petunia looked up from her plate, startled. His uncle Vernon stopped with a piece of meat he'd been chewing stuck in his left cheek pouch. They both looked at their son as though they'd been hit by the strongest stunning curse there was.

"What?" his dad exploded after a minute, not having moved the half-chewed meat, so it went flying out of his mouth into the middle of the table. He reached for it, picked it up and put it back in his mouth. Harry recoiled, grimacing. "We never get him anything, you know that!" That wasn't strictly true, Harry thought. For his tenth birthday he'd received a pair of his uncle's old socks and a wire coathanger.

"Exactly!" Dudley shot back at his father. "What if something had happened to you when I was little, and Harry's parents had taken me in? Would you want them to treat me the way you've treated him all these years?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Aunt Petunia. "If anything had happened to us, you've have gone to Aunt Marge's..."

"That's not the point!" Dudley sputtered. "What if I'd gone to her and she treated me the way you treat Harry?"

"Well, that would never happen, Duds, because she loves you."

"I'm saying 'what if,' you gits!" Dudley exploded at them, shaking his head. His parents looked at him perplexed, not understanding the source or content of his teenage rebellion.

"Don't you talk to me that way, young man!" his father yelled, after a moment of shock.

"I'll talk to you any way I damn well please," Dudley informed him, getting up and leaving the room. Harry sat uncomfortably, still chewing a carrot, trying to do it quietly, and looking back and forth between his aunt and uncle, who were now glaring at him, clearly blaming him for Dudley's behavior. Then it all came out.

"This is all your fault. You've--you've bewitched him! We'll tell that school of yours you're doing magic, and then you'll be kicked out!" said Aunt Petunia. Harry shook his head innocently, his eyes wide. He knew he wouldn't be kicked out; the Ministry of Magic could perform the *Priori Incantatem* on his wand and easily ascertain the last spell that had been performed by it; they wouldn't just take the word of a couple of Muggles.

He swallowed his food and excused himself, feeling their eyes boring into his back as he ran down the hall to the staircase. As much as he appreciated Dudley being on his side, he had been treading lightly with his aunt and uncle all summer, and he didn't need them blaming him for Dudley's change of heart and accusing him of breaking the law against underage wizards

performing magic outside of school.

He went up to his room and sat down on his bed to read more of Sirius' book, when it occurred to him that he hadn't had any birthday cake yet. He got up and opened the box on his desk, immediately smelling the rich chocolate and cream emanating from it. Then he had an idea, and he crossed the hall and knocked on Dudley's door.

"Hey, Dud," he whispered loudly, sticking his head around the door. "Want some cake?" Dudley had sat down to play a computer game. "Well, okay. But only a small piece. I'm in training, you know."

Harry smiled. "I know." They went into his room and sat down on the floor, but suddenly Dudley got up and ran back to his room. He returned with plates and forks and a cake server. Harry was perplexed as to why these things were in his room.

"When they put me on the diet, Mum cleaned all of the food out of my room I had stashed there, but she didn't care about this stuff. I have a service for eight." Harry smiled and sliced some cake for them both. "Happy Birthday, Harry," Dudley said with his mouth full.

Harry swallowed a bite of Mrs. Weasley's delicious birthday cake and smiled at his cousin. "You know, Dud, I actually think it is."

They each tucked in two pieces of cake and said goodnight. Harry took off his shirt, followed by the rest of his clothes, except for his drawers. He lay back on the bed with his hands behind his head, gazing across the room at the cards and photos on the shelf, especially the photo of Hermione on the beach. He fingered the amulet around his neck for a moment; somehow, the idea of sleeping with it around his neck didn't bother him the way a shirt did. He took off his glasses and turned out the light. His birthdays were definitely getting better.

Chapter Three

The Houseguest

The following week was uneventful. Harry and Dudley rose early each morning to go running, and Harry spent each day after that working in the garden, often wearing Sandy and talking to her. In the evenings, he read his new books or did summer homework. He had taken to bringing Sandy in with him at night; he even slept with her on his arm now. At the times she *wasn't* on his arm, it felt strangely light.

The first time he brought her up to his room, she was rather alarmed at the sight of Hedwig. "Did you bring me here to kill me?" she asked. Harry looked down at her.

"No, that's my pet owl, Hedwig. She delivers mail. She can find someone anywhere in the world and deliver a letter to them, even if I don't know where they are. All post owls can."

"Impressive," Sandy hissed, sounding unconvinced. "So. You already have a pet." She sounded a little hurt.

"Well, Hedwig performs a service for me, and I take care of her and feed her. So, I guess she's more of a servant than a pet." It suddenly occurred to him that it wasn't a very different arrangement than house elves, who Hermione insisted were unjustly enslaved. "I thought you didn't want to be my pet."

"That is true. Nor do I fancy being a servant. So what am I?"

Harry looked at her thoughtfully. "How about my roommate?"

"What is roommate?"

"It's just a term for people who share living quarters. They're usually friends."

“What about friend?”

“What about it?”

“Why did you suggest roommate first, instead of friend?”

“I—I don’t know. Are you my friend Sandy? I’d like that.”

“Yes. I am your friend, Harry Potter.”

* * * *

About a week-and-a-half after his birthday, Harry was preparing to go upstairs after dinner when the doorbell rang. Not thinking twice about it, Harry called, “I’ll get it!” and went to turn the knob.

It was Snape.

Harry immediately screamed and recoiled; Snape was the last person he had expected to see on Privet Drive. He was attempting to dress in Muggle clothes, something Harry had never seen him do. But the clothes were somewhat out of place in Surrey (except for the eccentric retired colonel two streets over); he was clad as someone on safari in Africa, from his bush boots to his pith helmet with mosquito netting. He even had a machete hanging on his belt, although Harry noticed his wand in a holster on the other side. Where his knees showed between his khaki shorts and his knee socks, he was deathly pale, betraying the fact that he had never been on a safari in his life. His lank black hair was pulled back into a pony tail under the helmet. Harry stood staring at him in disbelief.

“Nice to see you too, Potter,” he growled. Harry stepped back abruptly as Snape moved forward, looking around suspiciously, as though expecting an ambush from the light fixture on the ceiling or the flower arrangement on the hall table. Then a large black dog followed him in, and Harry sighed with relief.

“Sirius! Thank goodness!” But his godfather did not transform into his human self; he also sniffed about the hall suspiciously, then seemed to nod at Snape, who went back outside and summoned some other people who had been standing just outside the circle of light spilling out into the night from the hall.

The people stepped into the house. It was Hermione and her parents. Harry was as shocked as he’d been when he’d seen Snape. “Hermione!” was all he could say. The entire Granger family looked like they’d been through the ringer. They all staggered under the weight of their luggage, which they’d presumably been lugging from England to the Greek Islands to Bulgaria. He thought Hermione looked especially exhausted, although he couldn’t see her eyes; she had on dark glasses. She wore denim shorts that were just above her knees. A large white T-shirt with a blue and white Greek flag on it was tucked into her shorts and on her feet she wore rugged-looking hiking sandals. They all looked a bit dusty, as though they had walked there from Bulgaria.

Harry ushered them into the living room and shut the front door. Dudley and his parents were now standing in the hall, staring incredulously at the odd party that had invaded their house.

“See here, now--” Harry’s uncle began as he came into the living room with Aunt Petunia and Dudley close behind. Suddenly, Sirius changed from a large black dog into a human, and Aunt Petunia crouched behind her husband and screamed. Sirius brushed some dust from his black robes and smoothed his dark hair back.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said, extending his hand to Vernon Dursley. “I am Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather. We meet at last.”

Vernon Dursley cowered back against his wife, refusing to touch Sirius’ extended hand.

Suddenly, Dudley stepped up and grasped his hand, saying in an authoritative voice, “Dudley Dursley,” and shaking Sirius’ hand firmly. Sirius smiled at Dudley and Harry gave Dudley an appreciative nod. Then he noticed Dudley looking at Hermione.

“We are sorry to arrive unannounced like this, but this is an emergency. While the Grangers were in Bulgaria, there was an attempted abduction. Dark wizards tried to kidnap Hermione.” Harry looked in shock at Hermione, who was sitting, stony faced, still wearing her dark glasses. “Viktor Krum managed to thwart the abduction, but not before Hermione heard them talking about receiving their instructions from someone named Lucius.” He paused, to let this sink in. “I think we all know who that is.”

The Dursleys shook their heads dumbly, having no idea what Sirius was going on about, just looking like they wished he and the rest of them would go away. Hermione’s mother sat next to her and put her arm around her, tried to get her to put her head on her shoulder. Hermione would have none of it, sitting up again pointedly, refusing to be coddled.

“I was traveling with the Grangers from Greece to Bulgaria, but I had gone to meet with Professor Snape here when the abduction occurred. We talked to the headmaster of Hogwarts, who felt that this would be the safest place for Hermione until school starts. Her parents will go into hiding for their protection; arrangements are being made.” The Grangers looked grim about this.

“We--we have a check we can give you. For Hermione’s room and board for the rest of the summer,” Hermione’s mother told the Dursleys. Harry saw his aunt’s eyes light up. Aunt Petunia rarely turned down money, and the Grangers looked pretty normal, except for traveling in the company of Sirius and Snape.

“Can she stay?” Sirius asked the Dursleys. They seemed afraid to refuse him. Vernon Dursley gave a very small nod, and Mr. Granger took out a checkbook and started writing a check. He handed it to Harry’s uncle, who opened his eyes wide and suddenly seemed to wake up.

“Harry!” he barked. “Take your friend’s luggage up to the guest room!” He practically grabbed the check from Mr. Granger, who looked taken aback. Harry picked up Hermione’s bags and said, “Your room’s upstairs.” She nodded and followed him out into the hall. Sirius changed back into a dog, prompting another scream from Aunt Petunia. Snape and the Grangers moved into the hall with the large black dog.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,” Snape said in an oily voice, as though speaking to Muggles were extremely distasteful to him. “We will leave now.”

After the front door shut, Harry and Hermione continued up the stairs. She was still holding her head up stoically. Harry put down the bags to open the door, then reached in and turned on the light, letting her go first. He followed her in, placing her luggage on the bed and then standing, watching her carefully. The room seemed very quiet.

Suddenly Hermione whispered, “Close the door.”

Harry closed it, and immediately, Hermione took off her dark glasses, revealing eyes red from crying. “Oh, Harry!” She went to Harry and flung her arms about his waist, sobbing into his chest. Harry slowly put his arms around her, his cheek on the top of her head (he was surprised to find that he was now several inches taller than her; they used to be the same height) and he brought up one hand to smooth her hair, surprised at the soft texture of the curls. She had last hugged him on the train platform at King’s Cross at the end of June, and given him a kiss on the cheek that surprised him; she had never done that before. But this wasn’t like a brief goodbye hug; they had never held each other like this while she cried into his chest. They stood that way

for what seemed a long time, then, when she had been simply sagging against his chest for a while and had stopped crying, he lifted her face to look at her and kissed her gently on the forehead.

“You’re tired. Get some sleep.”

He went to the door and opened it. She looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Good night, Hermione.”

“Good night, Harry.”

Harry closed the door gently, finding Dudley in the hall with a questioning look on his face. Harry shook his head firmly. “She needs to rest.” Dudley nodded and went to his room. Harry went into his own room and shut the door. He undressed for bed, but paused before getting in and went to the shelf above his desk and took down the picture of Hermione on Corfu, carrying it to the bed and sitting on the edge. Then he propped it against the lamp on his bedside table and looked at it for a long minute. Finally, he took off his glasses and turned out the light.

* * * *

Harry felt his bed bounce. Startled, he opened his eyes. The sun had come up, but only just. There was a pale, grey light outdoors and a slight apricot tinge at the edges of the sky. He squinted down at the foot of his bed, finding Hermione sitting there. She was wearing what he supposed were summer pajamas, some light blue cotton shorts and a matching button-down shirt with a pointed collar and a pocket. She sat with her arms around her legs, her knees pulled up to her chin, staring into space. He rubbed his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. When he had put them on, he pulled himself into a sitting position, the sheet falling to his waist. She was looking at him strangely, he thought.

“Hermione?” he ventured, hoping to bring her out of her catatonia. She looked him in the eye now.

“You look different,” she said simply.

“I’ve been doing manual labor all summer,” he told her, holding up his hands. “My calluses have calluses.” But he felt her eyes on his torso, not his hands.

“Your voice is lower, too.”

“Yeah, but my singing voice hasn’t improved any. Right now I’d say I’m a tenor, but I may wind up a baritone.”

She didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Harry wasn’t used to her being so quiet; she was usually talking unless her nose was in a book. She had positively gabbled at him and Ron on their first train ride to Hogwarts. Her eyes moved around the room. He saw her look at the photo of herself on the bedside table; he wished now that he’d put it in a drawer or something. Then she seemed to be looking at Sandy on his arm, and the basilisk amulet that rested on his sternum.

“You haven’t met Sandy,” he decided to say, to break the silence. He leaned down to speak to the snake. “Sandy? Are you awake?”

Sandy raised her head. “I am now.”

He looked at Hermione, who now had her mouth open. “You know,” she now said, “I’ve only heard you speak Parseltongue one other time: in the Dueling Club second year when you were telling the snake Malfoy had conjured to leave Justin alone, and everyone thought you were egging it on.”

“Until I heard Sandy talking in the garden, I forgot I could do it. She’s with me a lot now. It’s nice to have her to talk to.”

“It is nice to talk to you, too,” Sandy told him. “I have learned much about humans.”
“What did she say?” Hermione wanted to know. Talking about Sandy seemed easier for her than what Harry really wanted to talk about: the attempted abduction.
He smiled. “She said that she likes talking to me, too, and she’s learned a lot about humans.”
For a moment, he considered telling her about snakes having the Sight. But then he remembered that he had thought about what it could do for him to have Sandy with him in school for his fifth year, especially in Divination, telling him what was going to happen in a few minutes...Hermione would probably consider this cheating, and not worthy of a prefect, or more importantly, not worthy of *him*, and he decided not to mention it. He still hadn’t decided whether he would go through with it. It *did* smack of cheating, he supposed.

“What’s that?” she said after a prolonged silence, pointing to the amulet. Harry reached down and fingered it. “It’s a birthday present. From Ginny.”

“Ah,” Hermione said, understanding the connection. Harry thought Hermione probably wouldn’t have chosen to give him a basilisk amulet if *she* had been the one down in the Chamber of Secrets, like Ginny. As it was, Hermione had figured out first that the denizen of the Chamber was a basilisk, and had looked at it using a mirror. But that didn’t offer her enough protection, and she had been petrified. She was in a near-death, open-eyed coma, broken only by a potion made from mandrake root. Hermione didn’t have any romantic ideas about basilisks.

Suddenly, she looked shrewdly at him. “Are you hiding under those covers for some reason? Sleeping in the buff?”

Harry was shocked. “No! But--well, close. Just my drawers. Could you--excuse me while I get dressed? Dudley and I go running every morning.”

She smirked. “Boxers or briefs?”

“Boxers.”

“Color?”

“Black.”

“How wizard-like. Come on, it sounds about the same as swim trunks.”

“Hermione, *please...*”

“All right, all right, I’m going.” She got up and went to the door, looking pointedly again at the photo of herself on the bedside table, but not saying anything. When he had gone, he swung his legs out of bed and went to his wardrobe to get some running clothes; he had been able to do some shopping with the money he was making from working in the garden, and for simplicity’s sake as much as anything else, he had bought virtually all black clothes: black shorts and singlets for running, along with black socks and running shoes, plus black jeans and turtlenecks and button-down shirts for wearing with his school robes in the fall, plus a few black sweaters and T-shirts. He’d even, as he’d already told Hermione, bought black boxers.

After he’d gone to the wardrobe, his bedroom door opened again. It was Hermione. She stood with her hand on the knob for a moment, smiling at having caught him in just his drawers.

“Can I go running with you two? I’ve got some appropriate clothes. And after what happened in Bulgaria--let’s just say that I’d like to be in better physical shape, for times when I can’t use magic, you know?”

Harry stood his ground, refusing to hide or blush. “Sure. Meet us at the front door in five minutes.” She nodded, not moving, and he felt her eyes on him again. They looked at each other for a long minute before she left. Harry looked at the photo on his bedside table, thinking, Oh,

well. Fair's fair. I've seen her in *that*....

The three of them met in the front hall, Harry in his black running clothes with Sandy around his arm still (Dudley had gotten used to it, but Harry had avoided letting his aunt and uncle see the snake), Dudley in his running clothes and Hermione in a grey running bra and very tight royal blue bicycle shorts. Dudley goggled and Harry tried not to; she didn't look like she was out of shape to *him*, but if she wanted to come along, he was fine with that.

They all had some water and Harry led them in doing stretching exercises on the front lawn after he'd taken Sandy off his arm and put her under a bush to await his return. Hermione wasn't used to the warm-up routine, but she caught on fairly quickly. Harry tried not to look at her any more than was absolutely necessary.

Dudley was making no such effort to avert his eyes, however, and once they started running, he seemed to purposely position himself behind Hermione for the view. They went back and forth to the park three times, and Hermione never fell back or seemed to be straining.

After breakfast, Hermione came out to the garden with him to watch him work. She was dressed in a simple green checked sleeveless blouse and white cotton shorts and sneakers. Her brown curls were still slightly damp from her shower, and her tan made the whites of her eyes look very bright. Harry was in his usual black clothes, a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts and black work boots he'd gotten because the steel toes would protect him if he dropped any stones on his feet (which he'd done several times). She sat against the wall of the house in the position she'd taken that morning in his bedroom; arms around her legs, knees drawn up to her chin. It occurred to Harry that she was trying to be invulnerable to attack; she was a fortress under siege. He wondered exactly how traumatic the attempted abduction had been, and what Lucius' thugs had done to her...

She watched him all morning, silently. He had been wearing his tape player from Dudley to while away the time while working, or sometimes talking to Sandy, but he had left the gift inside today, and when Sandy lifted her head and spoke to him, he hissed back softly, "Sorry, Sandy. We'll talk later. This isn't a good time." The snake accepted this without comment, resting her head on her tail again and going to sleep.

They ate their lunch in the garden, and as had been his wont, Harry removed his shirt afterward and leaned back on the grass to get some sun. As the sun beat orangely against his eyelids, he was vaguely aware that Hermione had moved, then he felt her recline beside him, mere inches away, and after a few minutes, eyes still closed, he said her name. He got no response at first, so he said it again. Before he'd gotten the second syllable out, however, she said slightly impatiently, "I heard you."

He was silent again for a half-minute, then said, "Sorry. I wasn't sure. I just wondered whether you felt like talking yet. About Bulgaria." He stayed on his back, eyes closed, hoping that if they didn't have to look at each other it would be easier for her to talk. She sighed, as though she were going to tell him again that it was too soon, but instead, she plunged right in.

"We were in the marketplace. Viktor's mother and my mum were looking at bread at the bakery, Viktor and my dad were buying some chicken, and I was supposed to be getting the vegetables. It seemed pretty safe; the vegetable stall was just two away from the chicken vendor, and I was just going to get some onions and peppers...But then I suddenly felt all lightheaded and floaty, like I was under the Imperious Curse. I tried fighting it, but there was nothing to fight, I wasn't being told to do anything I didn't want to do. I decided that I had an incredible urge to buy vegetables, but that's what I was already *there* for. I remember being

very confused, like I was waiting for instructions, but they didn't come.

"I remember reaching for a red pepper like I was in a trance, and I tried to ask how much it was, using a phrase Viktor's mum had taught me. But when it came out, it didn't sound like my voice. The woman who was running the stall said I didn't look well--she sounded very far away--and I thought, maybe I'm not under the Imperious Curse, maybe I'm just ill. I'm in a foreign country, I've gotten ill on unfamiliar food and water before, I had some Muggle medicines in my purse, I could just take something to feel better. She brought me round to the inside of the stall where she sat, and she was so nice, she was just patting me and talking to me in English--and now that I think about it, she *shouldn't* have been speaking to me in English, should she? She didn't even have a Bulgarian accent.

"Then I just--stopped. I absolutely stopped. It was like I was a light that had been switched off. I don't remember hearing any incantation. I don't remember being given a potion--nothing. When I--started again, it was dark out, and on either side of me were two men in grey wizards' robes, both with their wands pointing at me. My head felt all right again, but I forced myself to look kind of spacy, as though I weren't really with it, because they were talking and I wanted to hear what they were saying. The woman who had been running the vegetable stall had disappeared. The marketplace was empty.

"One of them said, 'Lucius will be very pleased.' They spoke English. The other one said that the four others were taken care of, three other girls from Hogwarts and a Muggle boy who had still been at his Muggle school in June when they'd done it--whatever 'it' was. Then they talked about me, about the way I looked, and about whether they should do anything--extra--"

That's what he was afraid of. It was an effort for Harry to remain where he was with his eyes closed. After another beat, he said, "Go on."

She took a deep breath and said, "Well, as far as I know, they didn't do anything--extra. Then they both pointed their wands at me at the same time--I felt like I couldn't move--and they both said an incantation which I can't remember. It's possible that they put a memory charm on me after that, which might be why I can't remember. You know I only need to hear an incantation once, and I can usually remember it..."

"I know," Harry said softly.

"Then--I stopped again. And when I started once more, it was daylight, and I opened my eyes, and I was lying on the couch in Viktor's house, and he was lifting me up and calling to my parents, telling them that I was back, that it was all right..."

"But you're not convinced of that."

"Well, it's not that; it's just that I don't know. I've got--all this lost time. Who knows?"

Harry reached out his hand blindly, found Hermione's and laced his fingers through hers. He felt her grasp his hand almost spasmodically and he squeezed back. They didn't talk anymore, and when the alarm on his watch went off, he opened his eyes and got up to work as though nothing had happened. He let go of Hermione's hand and put on his shirt. He looked down at her, still lying on her back, her eyes closed against the sun, tears running out from under her eyelids. He ached so for her; if there was one thing she needed, it was *certainty*.

Suddenly she sat up and shook her head impatiently. She wiped her eyes quickly, as though the tears were merely an irritation, and then got to her feet briskly and said, "Right, then. No point to me just sitting about and watching you do all the work, is there? What do you want me to do?"

Harry looked at her, amazed. Was she just going to pretend that she hadn't been discussing

what happened in Bulgaria--and what could have happened, that she just didn't know about? Apparently she was. "Well," he started, hesitating, "we have to plant these rose bushes near the wall here; they're climbers, and eventually they'll cover the trellis. It's all just like Herbology, but without the bubotuber pus making your hands swell up."

Hermione laughed; it was such a relief to hear it. "Oh, that howler! And the other letters! All those people who believed Rita Skeeter when she said that I was toying with you and Viktor!" Harry had to smile too. "By the way," he said. "Whatever happened to Rita Skeeter?" Hermione looked like she had just forgotten to tell him that she'd won the lottery. "Oh! Harry! Rita Skeeter! Wait till you hear!"

"I *am* waiting!" Harry replied in falsetto, imitating her. She threw a clod of dirt at him.

"Don't mock me. When we got to London, I took Rita home with me, but I didn't let her out yet. I wrote to Professor McGonagall and explained to her about Rita. Since she's a *registered* animagus, she doesn't hold much with those who want to skirt the law. Anyway, she talked to Dumbledore, and they both Apparated to my house. Mum and Dad didn't know what to think; McGonagall made like that was always how they told students that they were going to be prefects, in person. Anyway, when mum and dad had left the room, I took the Unbreakable Charm off the jar I'd been keeping Rita in, and I let her out of it. She was reluctant to become her human self. I think maybe she hoped that if she stayed a beetle, McGonagall and Dumbledore would think I was daft and making it all up. Finally, they threatened to force her to reveal herself--you know, like Sirius and Lupin did to Wormtail--so she decided to give in, and the next thing we knew, there was Rita, sitting in my living room, looking at me. And boy, if looks could kill..."

"You did keep her in a jar eating leaves for about two weeks."

"And she maligned my and your *and* Viktor's good names, not to mention Hagrid. No more than she deserved; quite a lot less, I think."

Harry tried not to laugh; funny, he *could* laugh about Rita Skeeter now. During the Triwizard Tournament he never would have believed it. "Anyway--" he prompted her.

"Anyway," Hermione continued, as though he hadn't just said the same word, "McGonagall immediately started in on her about the reasons for all Animagi to be registered, but Dumbledore stopped her and said that in covert work, having an unregistered animagus on your side could be very advantageous."

"Well, he was referring to Sirius, obviously."

"Yes. But he was also making a proposal to her; he said, 'If you don't mind taking orders from an obsolete dingbat, I've got a job for you.' She didn't want to get fined or even jailed for the unregistered Animagus business, so she listened to what he had to say, and--"

"And what? What's he having her do?"

Her face fell. "That's just it. I don't know. He made me leave the room with McGonagall, so she could keep an eye on me and make sure I didn't find some way to eavesdrop. When we went back to the living room they were already gone, and then McGonagall said congratulations on being a prefect, I'd get an official letter, and she'd see me in the fall."

"Then what?"

"Then nothing. She was gone. Poof."

Harry frowned. "And how does Dumbledore know that Rita Skeeter will do the right thing? That she's not an unregistered Animagus so that she can work for Voldemort?"

"Well, I think she just did it because it makes it possible for her to get all those scoops. It's a

great way to be a fly on the wall--or beetle, rather. And I don't know how Dumbledore knows what her loyalties are. We keep wondering why he trusts Snape, but that hasn't blown up in his face."

"Yet."

"Oh, Harry. You have no idea. Snape was actually very--nice when he came to Bulgaria. He seemed very concerned about me. I half expected him to take points from Gryffindor for me being stupid enough to get myself kidnapped. But he didn't ream me out at all. He really let Viktor have it for not keeping an eye on me, though..."

"And why did Sirius say Viktor thwarted the kidnapping? It sounds like you were returned. Like they kidnapped you and then changed their minds."

"Oh, Viktor said that he was in the marketplace waiting outside the vegetable stall just when those two wizards aimed their wands at me. He did a very fast stunning spell on both of them, and then put a full-body bind on them both and left them there. He took me back to his parents' house, but it took until morning before whatever they'd done to me wore off. When Sirius got to the vegetable stall, they were gone, though."

"Or at least, that's Viktor's story."

She nodded grimly. "Or at least that's his story. Don't think I haven't thought about that, Harry. I mean, I was having a good time with Viktor in Sofia, he was..." she looked down and colored, "...sort of...you know, my first boyfriend..." she avoided looking at him. "But I suppose I don't...I don't really feel about him the way he feels about me. It's just a--" but she turned even redder and didn't finish.

"Just a what?" Harry suddenly very much wanted to know. Hermione looked up at him.

"It doesn't matter. What does matter is that I've got a real problem now."

"More of a problem than almost being abducted by dark wizards working for Lucius Malfoy?"

"It could be all the same problem. Like you said, Viktor's version of how things went--that's his story, and no one can corroborate it. Maybe they meant all along for me to be returned. Maybe even now I'm under some kind of spell and don't know it. I don't feel like I am, but you never know...The problem I'm talking about is how to get rid of Viktor."

"You want to kill Viktor?" Harry said, shocked.

She threw another clod of dirt at him. "No, you stupid--I mean, he thinks of us as girlfriend and boyfriend now. He's going to come to Hogsmeade when we have weekend visits. And I can't break up with him and I can't stay with him!"

"What?" Harry sputtered, confused.

"See, if I break up with him, he might be angry. I've seen him angry. And he was trained in the Dark Arts, don't forget. I'd hate to think what he'd do if I broke up with him and he became--agitated. But I can't just stay with him because I'm afraid of how he'll respond if I break up with him. That'd be daft. But if I broke up with him and someone like Lucius Malfoy wanted him to work for him, he might be angry enough that he wouldn't need to be coerced. Plus, as we've already seen, he's not at all able to fight the Imperious Curse. You told me how Moody--I mean Crouch--put the Imperious Curse on him in the maze, and he turned right around and put the Cruciatus Curse on Cedric. He was very easily manipulated. And although I don't have any proof, that could have been what happened in Bulgaria, as well. At least, I'd rather believe that he did that while cursed than voluntarily, if he did cooperate with Lucius' underlings. Let's just say that being with Viktor doesn't exactly make me feel safe and well-protected. *Here* I feel safe."

“Here?” Harry was mystified.

She looked at him with her eyes narrowed. “You don’t know, do you? Ever since you were a baby, there have been charms protecting your house for several blocks around. It’s impossible to Apparate in and out, or even to use a Portkey--Snape had one we used to come back to your village, but we had to land about a mile away. I’m not convinced the protection reaches that far, but he wanted to play it safe. That’s why we were knackered when we got here last night--it was late, I was hauling my trunk, and Snape wouldn’t let Sirius put a spell on it to make it lighter.”

Harry was puzzled. “Once, the Weasleys came by Floo Powder. They got the living room fireplace temporarily added to the Floo Network, got special permission from the Ministry of Magic. Of course, it didn’t work too well, since the fireplace is boarded up...”

“But, see? They had to get special permission to do that. There are also Dark Magic detectors all over the place here. Why do you think Voldemort or his Death Eaters haven’t just come here to get you?”

Harry pulled a face. “I guess I always thought they were repulsed by the prospect of meeting the Dursleys.” They both laughed then, and decided to finally get to work.

* * * * *

It was nice to have someone to work with again, after Dick, and Hermione wasn’t afraid to get dirty or do heavy lifting, although he tried to spare her the worst of it. For the rest of the week, Hermione went running with them in the mornings and worked with Harry in the garden the rest of the day. After the second day, Dudley noticed Hermione on her hands and knees in the garden, and volunteered to come help them. Harry understood why, but he didn’t mind. He couldn’t blame Dudley, really. Although it was more than a little disturbing when Hermione got rather--*flirty* with him. He’d never seen her do that. She’d gotten rather silly at times when she was around Gilderoy Lockhart, during second year, but she’d only been twelve then.

With all three of them working, the garden was soon done, and Harry collected his last five pounds from his aunt. Now, after morning runs, he went into the garden to do some basic watering and weeding, but otherwise had the rest of the day free. He and Hermione worked on some summer homework, sitting on benches under the new arbor, while Dudley sat nearby, playing video games on a small hand-held unit. Sometimes he let Harry or Hermione use it when they were tired of working; he seemed to feel it was quite necessary to hang over Hermione’s shoulder when it was her turn.

At the end of the third week of August, Aunt Petunia was being quite petulant at dinner. She started muttering under her breath about cooking for an extra person, pointedly looking at Hermione. Figuring that he’d made all the money he was going to from the garden (and having spent most of it) Harry felt compelled to defend Hermione.

“She cleans her own room and does her own laundry. Plus, her parents gave you a pretty hefty check...”

But suddenly, Dudley was shouting hotly at his mother, “You leave Hermione alone! She’s the most--the most--”

“Dudley!” his mother exclaimed reproachfully. His father glowered at him.

“Don’t forget, boy!” he growled. “She may look normal, but she’s a--a--one of *those*!” his father sputtered.

“Say it, Dad! Just say it! She’s a *witch*! A witch! Why won’t you just talk about it normally? Harry’s a wizard and Hermione’s a witch, and they call us Muggles! They fly around on

broomsticks and--and--at least she's not something beginning with a B that *rhymes* with witch!" he finished, looked pointedly at his mother before storming out of the room.

"Dudley!" both of his parents exclaimed.

After Dudley left the room, it was very quiet. Harry and Hermione glanced furtively at each other, continuing to eat their food quietly. The silence was deafening. Harry was reminded uncomfortably of his birthday. What had gotten into Dudley lately? he wondered. It wasn't just Hermione's arrival, either; this had been going on all summer. Oh, well, Harry thought. I suppose most fifteen-year-old boys rebel against their parents in some way. He tried to imagine what he would have been like if he'd been raised by his own parents, how he would relate to them now that he was in his mid-teens. Try as he might, he couldn't imagine being anything but relieved to have parents. Perhaps that was the problem, he thought. Most teenagers just didn't know what it was like to not have parents at all. Although in Dudley's case, in Harry's opinion, he'd have been lucky to know what that was like. He tried then to imagine the scenario that Dudley had raised before, Harry's parents living and taking in Dudley in the event that something happened to Petunia and Vernon. He couldn't imagine that any better than he could imagine rebelling against the parents he had never had a chance to know.

Perhaps because they had a guest--even though his aunt was already being rude to her--Harry's aunt and uncle didn't say another word. Before they had a chance to rise from the table, however, Hermione spoke.

"Don't worry about the clearing up, Mrs. Dursley. Harry and I will do it. And I would also like to make a special dinner on my last night here, as a thank you for letting me stay. I took a course with this amazing chef in Athens while we were in Greece in July...please say yes," she said sweetly, looking at them both placatingly. Harry's uncle squirmed uncomfortably and looked at his wife.

"All right," he said, rising from the table. Petunia Dursley followed him out of the room, looking rather hurt still about Dudley's outburst. Harry and Hermione cleared the table and stood together at the sink to wash and dry the dishes. Harry heard the television come on in the living room.

"Cooking class while on vacation? Are you never not going to school?" he asked her. She laughed and splashed him with some suds. He splashed her back, and it threatened to become a free-for-all, but Sandy (under his shirt sleeve, where his aunt and uncle had been unaware of her) said that his aunt was coming into the room, so Harry stopped abruptly and whispered to Hermione, "Aunt Petunia's coming."

She looked at him quizzically, then turned and looked at the doorway. Nothing happened. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Give it a minute," Harry whispered, wiping dishes. Hermione counted to sixty under her breath, and when she reached sixty-one, Aunt Petunia came into the kitchen. She looked at Harry again, almost scared.

"How did you know--" she started to whisper, but Aunt Petunia had other ideas.

"The two of you had better not break anything!" she exclaimed shrilly, her hands on her hips. They looked at her, wide eyed, assured her that they would be careful, and she turned and left again.

Hermione looked at Harry. He avoided her eyes, wiping dishes and glasses, thinking, I've got to keep her from knowing that Sandy has the Sight...that was a little close...

The next day, after their morning run and showers, Hermione and Harry sat under the arbor in

the garden while Dudley sat nearby, playing his portable computer game. Hermione had brought her notebook from the Greek cooking class and was paging through it, looking for the right recipes for the meal she was planning to serve before they left for the Burrow. She made notes on a piece of lined paper with a ball-point pen; it struck Harry that this was the first time he'd ever seen her not writing on parchment using a quill and a bottle of ink. Sometimes he forgot that she'd had a Muggle upbringing, like him.

At one point, Dudley got up to go in and get a different game, and Harry leaned back contentedly, considering the summer. "You know," he said to her, "With you here, and with Dudley being friendly to me now, it's almost like having a brother and a sister. It's nice." He was perplexed to see the expression of appalled dismay on Hermione's face. "Sister?" she said softly. "Sister?" she repeated. Harry didn't know what to think. When Dudley returned, Hermione closed her cooking notebook and rose, saying she was going inside to read. Harry watched her go, wondering what he'd said wrong...

After lunch, Dudley had to go shopping for his school things with his parents. As they were leaving, however, Harry's uncle suddenly looked at Harry and Hermione shrewdly, suspiciously. "I don't know whether we can trust you two here alone together..." he started to say. Hermione looked up at him brightly.

"Oh, don't worry, Mr. Dursley. We're both prefects. And we know how serious it would be to break the law against underage--you know--"

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "That wasn't what I was talking about," he said through his teeth. Harry noticed that Hermione was flushed under her tan before she abruptly left the room. "You!" his uncle suddenly barked. "What are you going to do?"

"I was going to weed in the garden. Should take a while; dandelions are all over the place, trying to take over," Harry told him.

His uncle looked somehow unconvinced. "All right," he grumbled, and soon the Dursleys were off to buy Dudley his new Smeltings books and uniforms (the old ones would be far too large after the running he'd been doing).

Harry changed into his work clothes and went to the garden shed for a trowel and a kneeling pad. Hermione came to the back door. "Do you mind if I get some sun while you're working? I haven't been able to for a while, and I may not again since the summer's almost over."

Harry shrugged. "Sure. I don't need help with the weeding." She went back inside and Harry picked a spot to start, kneeling on the pad, pulling on gardening gloves and starting to dig out dandelion roots. (He didn't like the idea of using weed killer.) A short while later, he heard the kitchen door open again and Hermione came back out. He wasn't facing the door, he was bent over a particularly annoying dandelion root which seemed to be the source for all of the weeds in the garden. Then he looked up and goggled at the sight of Hermione.

She was wearing *the bikini*. She spread a towel on a patch of grass and sat on it, then picked up a bottle of sunscreen to protect her skin. He tried to look away, but he always seemed to see her out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't tell where she was looking; she had her dark glasses on again. If he thought the picture in his room was amazing, it was nothing compared to live-and-in-person.

When she was done, she lay down on her back and seemed to have her eyes closed. Her arms were by her sides, her whole body seemed to glisten in the sun, and Harry felt his mouth go dry. He dragged his eyes away, looking down at the dandelion root again.

He tried to concentrate on his work, but it wasn't easy. Several times he pulled out small

flowers instead of weeds, and tried to unobtrusively replace them, in case she was watching him. After a while, she sat up and then put her sunglasses up on top of her head. "Harry? Do you suppose you could help me put some sunscreen on my back?"

Harry looked at her, terrified. "On your back?"

She nodded. "I can't reach." And with that, she rolled over onto her stomach and pillowed her head on her arms. Harry took off his gardening gloves and walked over to her cautiously. He knelt by her side and picked up the bottle of sunscreen, put some on his hand, and began to rub it into the skin of her back. He sucked in his breath as he worked, trying to keep his breathing even and measured, trying not to think about how her skin felt. It was an effort not to give a sigh of relief when he was done, although he in fact felt tremendous relief. He rose to go, but she said, "I need help with the back of my legs, too."

Harry looked down at her legs, starting to feel like his head was swimming. Maybe I could fake my scar hurting right about now, he thought. That might get me out of it. But he obligingly knelt down next to her again, putting sunscreen on the backs of her legs. When he touched his fingers to the back of her left knee, she flinched and sighed. Harry drew back in alarm.

"Go on," she whispered.

"Are you okay?" he ventured.

"The backs of my knees are just--sensitive."

He tried to quickly apply sunscreen to the rest of her legs, trying to cloud his mind and ignore the sounds she made when he touched the back of her other knee, trying not to look at her at all, or linger over her skin...

He was glad to finally be done, and went back to his weeding, but it went slowly; the hot sun made him feel lightheaded and stupid, and so did the sight of Hermione, lying on the towel in her small bikini. He avoided looking at her, he thought, and yet it seemed that he spent quite a lot of time looking at her.

Finally, he was able to put away his weeding supplies, having rid the garden of dandelions once more. "I'm going in," he said when he'd locked the potting shed. He opened the kitchen door, to escape into the house, but when he looked behind him, she had already risen and wrapped the towel around her waist, carrying the bottle of sunscreen and padding after him. Her short curls looked like they'd been touched by the sun too, golden highlights glistening here and there amidst the brown. In the kitchen, they both tried to get a cold drink out of the refrigerator at the same time, and Hermione wound up standing very close to him when they'd closed the door. Her face mere inches from his, Harry looked down, then jerked his eyes back up to her face guiltily. Her eyes seemed very close to his, the whites so white they looked tinged with blue at the edges.

"Still thinking of me as your sister?" she said almost in a whisper. She turned to go then, not seeing Harry's jaw drop, as he stood there, frozen in place, trying to figure her out.

He sat down at the kitchen table, hearing the shower turn on upstairs, and then trying not to think about *that*. He drank several glasses of water, to avoid dehydration, trying not to think about anything at all, and succeeding in thinking of nothing but her. When she came back downstairs, she was wearing some jeans and a simple blue blouse, looking very much like the school-year Hermione except for the new haircut and the deep tan. Her skin glowed, her hair shone, and Harry thought, why did I ever think Cho Chang was pretty? But then he was disturbed again by something: why had she flirted with Dudley?

She sat down next to him at the kitchen table, and almost before she was settled, he found

himself blurting it out: "Why have you been flirting with Dudley?"

She smiled and looked down at her hands. "Only to make sure that he's another ally. When Snape told me that Dumbledore wanted us to come here, I figured it would be a good idea to--cultivate him."

Harry nodded, then couldn't stop himself as another question came bursting forth. "You do realize that Ron is very jealous of Viktor, don't you?" Not that I am, he said in his head. Not that I am, not that I am...

She smiled ruefully. "Ron is an immature git. Don't get me wrong; I love him like--"and she looked pointedly at Harry-- "a brother. But if he's jealous of Viktor, well...I just cannot believe the way he acted about the Yule Ball, even now. The way he finally asked me--if that could be called asking me. *Hermione, you're a girl...* How flattering for him to notice! At least you actually walked up to the girl you liked and asked her, and then you managed to get Parvati to go with you and fixed up Ron with Padma...He didn't even get his own date! I don't think he's going to have a girlfriend for a long time....He's still such a big baby, and won't say how he feels..." she trailed off, as though this were upsetting to her, but she was trying not to think about it.

Suddenly she looked up at him. "Do you think you'll ever try asking Cho Chang out again?"

Harry grimaced. "Are you kidding? When I've thought about her this summer, all I can see is the way she was crying during the feast at the end of term, when we were toasting Diggory. Just buckets of it, streaming down her face. And I even had a dream that I was on a date with her; and she was saying things like, 'Oh, Harry, isn't it a good thing you got Cedric killed so we can be here like this?' So, no, I don't think I'll be asking her out again until this massive wave of guilt over Diggory passes--which will probably be never."

Hermione nodded. "I wondered whether you were convincing yourself you were responsible. Believe me, Harry, no one thinks you're to blame, not even his parents--"

He put his hand on her arm. "Save your breath, Hermione. I'm going to feel guilty about him for the rest of my life, and that's that. End of story."

She swallowed and put her hand over his. "You're still letting that eat you up, then?" He nodded, looking at the table. "Well, we need to find a way for you to think about other things, like helping me get rid of Viktor--or at least making sure we're not alone together. I know! You could go out with us in Hogsmeade!"

"You want me to go on your dates with Viktor?" He was appalled.

"Well, that might seem odd. Ron could come too. And Ginny. Maybe Parvati and Lavender, and George and Fred. We could make it a big group thing. He has a very hard time saying no to me; if I tell him that's how it's going to be, that's how it's going to be."

Harry promised to come along, and she leaned over suddenly and kissed him on the cheek, thanking him. Their faces were very close together. Suddenly, Harry stood, nearly knocking his chair over. "I--um--need to take a shower. Gardening--sweat and grime--you know--" He practically ran from the room, while he tried to convince himself he wasn't an immature git like Ron for having done that.

Just as he was passing through the front hall, the Dursleys returned. Harry told them he was about to take a shower before dinner, since the gardening was done, and Dudley said, "Does that mean Hermione's not doing anything? Hermione! Want to place Space Wars on my computer?"

Hermione came into the front hall and smiled at Dudley warmly. "I'd love to."

They all three went upstairs, Dudley and Hermione into his bedroom, and Harry into the bathroom. Standing under the spray, Harry thought again of Hermione sunning herself in the bikini, touching her skin while he was putting the sunscreen on her...But then he realized that even if Hermione *were* interested in him (and it was certainly starting to seem that she was), if she was already in danger merely for being his friend, how much more dangerous would it be for her to be his girlfriend? *And* there was Viktor Krum to consider. *And* there was Ron...Hermione thought he was annoying and immature, but he could turn into quite a formidable enemy if he were angry about Harry and Hermione being together--as Harry suspected he would be, if that were to happen and he found out. Then Harry would go from having two friends to having a girlfriend and yet another mortal enemy...

Harry got out of the shower with his head whirling. He dressed and went to Dudley's room, sitting on the bed and watching Hermione and Dudley at the computer, not saying anything. He felt like he was in a trance, trying to sort out his feelings and his desires, and trying to figure out if any of it was worth putting her life at even greater risk than it already was. He went down to dinner when it was time, and then he volunteered his and Hermione's services for clean-up duty again, so he could talk to her, but he couldn't seem to say anything to her that wasn't related to dishwashing and drying. She didn't talk much either, except for one time when she suddenly said, "You know, Harry, I never told you how proud I was that you stood up to Voldemort. So many adults wouldn't--or couldn't." She sounded a little like she was quoting Sirius' letter to the Dursleys--Sirius had probably said the same thing to Hermione, he supposed. He got the impression that she, however, was speaking of Viktor as one of those who couldn't or wouldn't.

They played chess in the living room after cleaning up, while the rest of the family watched an American comedy on the television, the laugh track filling the empty spaces in conversations so that no one felt compelled to talk. It was strange, now, Harry thought, to be playing chess and not having the pieces moving of their own volition...

After they finished the game (Harry won; he played a lot of chess with Ron, so he was used to having to work hard at it, but not used to winning) they said goodnight to the others and went upstairs. In the hall between their rooms, Hermione suddenly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek again. Harry swallowed, looking at her in terror, then tentatively leaned over and also kissed her on the cheek. She sighed.

"I suppose that if you want to think of me as your sister..." she trailed off. Harry grinned at her and whispered, "Too late," then forced himself to go into his room, after seeing her smile and blush in a satisfied-looking way, forcing himself not to step across the small hall and behave toward her in a far less brotherly fashion...

The next day would be their last before going to the Burrow. After the morning run, Hermione, Harry and Dudley went to the store to buy the ingredients she needed to make dinner. She wanted their help carrying it all back to the house. After lunch, she shut everyone out of the kitchen and started working on the meal. When it was close to time, Harry and Dudley moved the table and chairs out into the garden for the al fresco meal, per her instructions. When Hermione finally called them all to dinner, they were stunned. She had made sautéed mushroom caps with roasted peppers, olive tapenade, pesto and melted Gruyere cheese; a salad of wild greens with a balsamic vinaigrette; leg of lamb with sautéed spinach and truffle risotto; and chocolate gateau with Turkish coffee for dessert, plus fruit and cheese besides.

It was by far the most elegant meal any of them had ever eaten. Petunia and Vernon seemed to

have forgotten who had made it and went into raptures over every mouthful; Dudley was thrilled to be rid of celery and lettuce; and Harry thought, She should teach the house elves at school how to make this...then tried not to laugh at the thought of the house elves allowing themselves to be taught recipes by the mad reformer, Hermione Granger, who scandalized them every time she called their situation enslavement.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione cleaned up again. It seemed that she had used every pot in the kitchen. When they were done, it was only just getting dark, so they went out to sit in the garden, settling on the bench under the arbor. It seemed natural for Harry to put his right arm along the back of the bench behind her shoulders, then to bring his hand to rest lightly on her bare shoulder, stroking her soft skin lightly, moving his fingers in circles. Hermione leaned her head on his right shoulder, resting her left arm on his leg, as they listened to the symphony of the crickets and watched the pink glow fade from the sky and become sapphire velvet. Harry wasn't sure how long they were sitting like this when he looked down at her and saw her looking up at him. He couldn't think of anything to say; he didn't want to talk, and he hoped she didn't either. Then he knew what he wanted to do, knew it more clearly than he'd ever known anything before. Their mouths gradually grew closer and closer; he could feel her warm breath, smelling of chocolate and coffee, and he felt her lips begin to brush his.

"A large black dog is coming."

Harry started, pulling away from her. Sandy had spoken under the loose sleeve of his T-shirt. He looked around the garden, left and right, and over his shoulder. Then he looked back at Hermione, who seemed more than a little annoyed.

"What is it?" she said, an edge to her voice.

"Sirius is coming," he said simply, still looking around, trying to see his godfather, wondering whether he was already there and had seen them. He removed his arm from around her and crossed his arms over his chest. Hermione crossed her own arms, frowning; he thought it was possible she assumed he was just making excuses. But then, after another minute, glittering eyes appeared around the corner of the potting shed, and a large black dog came padding over to them quietly. Hermione looked at Harry again, annoyed and perplexed.

"You keep doing that!"

* * * * *

Chapter Four

Padfoot and the Knight Bus

Sirius sat down next to the bench, letting Harry and Hermione pet him. Hermione still looked at Harry with suspicion, he thought. Suddenly, the human form of Harry's godfather stood next to them. Sirius sat down on the bench next to Harry.

"Are you both ready to go? I've been to the Burrow--Ron and the rest of his family are fine. Bill and Charlie are still there--"

"Yeah," said Harry. "We know. Ron's not too happy about it."

"Yes. He feels like they're babysitting him."

"So he's just feeling like they're treating him like a baby?" Hermione asked. "He's just fine?" She didn't sound happy about this somehow. "I wrote to him while we were traveling--but he never wrote back, not once."

Sirius looked at her levelly. "Well, he asked me about how you were doing. Not in the

friendliest of ways, mind you. So I told him about the abduction. Then he seemed very concerned...”

Hermione looked very interested in this. Harry sat back and frowned. “Really? What did he say?” she wanted to know.

“Say? He didn’t say anything. But--I could tell he was concerned, all the same.” Sirius looked at her again, then at Harry, who grimaced. Sirius looked perplexed. He decided to change the subject.

“As you know, I’ll be coming with you on the Knight Bus--they allow pets--so you won’t be traveling alone. However; we’re going to have to walk nearly a mile away to get it. The protective charms around here have been enlarged. The bus apparates; it won’t be able to get any closer than that.”

So Snape wasn’t just overcompensating by setting them down in the village, Harry thought. Just a couple of years ago, I was able to get the Knight Bus over on Magnolia Crescent, a few blocks away...

Sirius changed back into a dog and went into the house with them. Dudley was in the kitchen, looking guilty about having his face in the refrigerator.

“Oh, hello, just looking to see if there was more of that chocolate--I mean, more fruit...”

Then he saw the large black dog with them. “Oh! Your godfather’s here already.”

Harry put his finger up to his lips. “Shhh! We’re going to get our trunks. We have to go.”

“I’ll help you with yours, Hermione!” he said enthusiastically. Hermione smile at him, and they left the room. Harry patted Sirius on the head.

“Wait here.”

Sirius seemed to nod. When Harry had thumped his trunk down the stairs, and gone back to get Hedwig in her cage, he waited in the hall. Dudley was carrying Hermione’s trunk down, looking as though he were going to pitch down the stairs at any second. Harry’s aunt and uncle stood in the living room doorway, looking as grumpy as ever, despite their good dinner.

“Can I come with you?” Dudley asked Harry.

His parents cried together, “Dudley!”

“I don’t mean go to his school--”

Sirius came padding down the hall from the kitchen and changed into his human form, making Petunia scream and hide again. “I think what he means is he’d like to see them off. That’s fine, but we have to walk about a mile away first.”

Hermione looked down at her trunk uncertainly. “It was awfully tiring to drag this here when I came, Sirius. Do you think you could--”

Sirius smiled at her. “All right. We’ll do it here, instead of outside. *Wingardium Leviosa*,” he said softly, tapping each of the trunks lightly. Petunia screamed again, not knowing what to expect; magic in her house! But all that happened was that each trunk now levitated about an inch off the floor, as though on very small wheels that couldn’t be seen.

Hermione nodded to the Dursleys. “Thank you for having me, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley.”

Harry nodded curtly at them. “Bye,” was all he said. Sirius changed into a dog again; Petunia screamed again. Dudley frowned at his mother.

“Get a grip,” he said to her, then opened the door. The four of them left, Harry and Hermione pulling their gently floating trunks behind them easily, Sirius padding before them. After about twenty minutes, Sirius sat down suddenly and looked at Harry and nodded. Harry took his wand out of the holster on the belt he’d gotten from Ron and put his arm out as if to hail a cab.

There was a very loud, abrupt BANG and a glaring light seemed to come from nowhere. Dudley and Hermione both screamed; neither of them had known what to expect. Dudley pulled Hermione's trunk up a dark driveway, and Hermione with it, since she was still holding onto the other handle. There appeared before them all, in the middle of the quiet suburban street, a triple-decker, very purple bus, where there had been nothing a moment before. Over the windshield, gold lettering proclaimed *The Knight Bus*.

Harry and Sirius walked calmly up to the bus, and after a moment, feeling a bit ridiculous, Hermione took her floating trunk over to where they stood, this time dragging Dudley reluctantly with her. He was shaking.

The conductor stepped off of the bus, his uniform as violently purple as the vehicle, and began his usual speech: "Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand--"

"Hello, Stan," said Harry with a smile, having heard his spiel before. Stan Shunpike stopped talking with a look of recognition.

"Harry! Harry Potter, as I live and breath!"

"Shhh!" Harry swiftly silenced him. "Quiet, or I may not go on living and breathing."

Stan winked at him. "Oh, I see. Traveling incognito again, are we? Being Neville Longbottom again, are we?" Another wink. "I'm with you. Hello, Neville Longbottom," he suddenly said very loudly. "And who is this with you?"

"This is my cousin Dudley. And this is--Lavender Brown."

"Come on aboard!" Stan exclaimed.

Hermione looked at him quizzically. "Neville? Lavender?"

"Yeah, I thought I told you, a couple of years ago..."

"Haven't got all night, Neville and Lavender," Stan said even louder than before, winking very broadly and smiling conspiratorially. "You goin' to London?"

"No. To the Burrow. That's near Ottery St. Catchpole." Harry opened his trunk and removed his money bag. "How much?" Harry asked Stan.

"Right. Let me take your trunks on board and check the rate schedule." He took out his wand and waved it carelessly toward their trunks and Hedwig's cage. "Second level all right?" Harry nodded. While the trunks moved up into the bus on their own, Dudley goggled and Stan consulted a small booklet he pulled out of his pocket. "Here we are: fifteen Sickles, but for seventeen you get 'ot chocolate, an' for nineteen--"

"That's okay Stan. That comes to thirty silver Sickles for the two of us, right? Here's two Galleons," and he handed two large gold coins to Stan.

"Your change," Stan said, taking the Galleons and returning to Harry four silver Sickles, which Harry put into his money bag.

"My--dog can come, right?" He looked at Sirius. He didn't notice Dudley trying to see what else was in Harry's money bag.

"Sure. All aboard!" Harry and Sirius climbed the steps, but Dudley put his hand on Hermione's arm.

"Write to me?" he asked her throatily. She nodded at him and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

"Of course, Dudley. Good bye." And she turned to go up the steps. Harry leaned out one of the curtained windows on the second level.

"What about your parents, Dud? They'll freak about the owls."

“Write to me at school; they’ll never know.”

“Bye!” Harry called to him, feeling for the first time in his life that he might actually miss him.

“Bye!” Dudley called, waving. Stan Shunpike stood next to the brass bedstead Harry had chosen. Hermione had placed her trunk at the foot of the bed next to his, and Sirius had lain down on the floor between the two beds.

“Harry--I mean, Neville--is that bloke a Muggle? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine, Stan. A couple of months ago, I wouldn’t have said that, but yes; he’s fine.”

Stan went back down the stairs to sit in an armchair next to the one the driver, Ernie Prang, was seated in. There was another earthshattering BANG and Harry and Hermione both found themselves on the floor, narrowly missing Sirius, thrown by the speed of the Knight Bus.

Outside in the street, Dudley fell backward onto a very green lawn, and somehow triggered the automatic sprinkler system. He sat, sprawled, oblivious to being watered along with the rest of the grass, saying only, “Wow....”

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione recovered from the bumpy start and lay down on their respective beds. Harry reached down his hand to idly pet Sirius. Hermione looked out the curtained windows, fascinated by the landscape going by; one moment they seemed to be in Manchester, the next in Edinburgh, then Bath....Harry smiled, watching her face. Here she was, having known for four years that she was a witch, and these things still amazed her. But then Harry had to smile to himself. What with all her reading, she probably knows about more amazing things than I do. Then he thought about other things he knew that she didn’t, like what it felt like to have Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on him, and he looked up at her again, at her innocent enjoyment of the passing scenery, her shock each time the bus made a leap. I hope she never knows that kind of pain, he thought. Or Ron.

Harry put his head down on his arms and closed his eyes. It seemed that he’d hardly been lying there like that for a moment when he heard Stan Shunpike come up the stairs bellowing, “Next stop: the Burrow!”

“That’s us! Hermione said excitedly, jumping up and grabbing her trunk, not even bothering to ask Sirius to float it again. “Oh, Harry, you never told me what this was like! It’s incredible!” With a BANG! the bus was driving along a quiet, dark country lane, then came to a halt. Harry smiled at her. “We should go.” He picked up Hedwig’s cage and dragged his trunk to the stairs. When Stan saw them coming, he levitated the trunks again, and they were able to just walk calmly down the stairs, following their belongings. Sirius padded after them. Harry checked his watch; it was only eleven o’clock at night. He looked up and saw one of the most comforting sights he knew of: the Burrow, home to the Weasley family. It looked like it ought to by rights be falling down, but Harry knew that magic prevented that, and that it was much larger on the inside than it looked from the outside.

Lights still glowed in most of the windows, and the Weasleys had probably not been able to ignore the noise of the bus’ arrival. Sure enough, the kitchen door opened and Ginny came out into the garden, breaking into a smile when she saw Harry.

Harry immediately got his own smile upon seeing her; she had become so tall and beautiful! he thought. She was wearing a simple summer dress, blue with a fitted waist and bodice, modestly covering her knees. She ran across the grass barefoot to greet him, and he ran to meet her halfway, still smiling, and surprised her by throwing his arms around her in a greeting hug, and twirling her around while she put her arms around his neck and laughed. He put her down,

grinning at her--she was just slightly taller than him, now--thinking, *It felt wonderful to hold her!* Even in the moonlight, he could see that Ginny's face was as red as her hair. Over her shoulder, he saw Hermione climbing down from the bus, frowning at them. He looked back to Ginny.

"Hello, Ginny! It's wonderful to see you. Thank you for my birthday present," he added, taking the basilisk amulet out of his shirt to show her. She smiled, looking thrilled.

"Well, you know, Ron said you'd gotten a snake--"

"Oh, right! This is Sandy." He took off his black denim jacket; he was wearing a black T-shirt from which he'd removed the sleeves, and showed her the small green garden snake curled around his upper arm just above his elbow. Ginny stepped forward tentatively and stroked Sandy.

"She feels nice," she whispered. Then she moved her fingers up to Harry's upper arm, above where Sandy was coiled, tracing the outline of the newly-visible muscles there, but she abruptly pulled her hand back guiltily and looked up at Harry. Their faces seemed very close together, and his skin was tingling where she'd stroked his arm.

What is this? Harry wondered. Earlier, Hermione and I almost--and now Ginny looks so nice, and I really enjoyed holding her, and--

The door opened again and Ron Weasley came into the garden. Both Harry and Ginny jumped, and pointedly separated themselves. Hermione walked over to them and nodded at Ginny, not smiling.

"Hello, Ginny."

Ginny looked perplexed by the cold greeting and said hello in return. Harry greeted Ron, who responded normally enough, but then there was another cold, awkward greeting between Ron and Hermione, who could best be described as grunting at each other. Ginny looked at them quizzically, then at Harry, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He was playing dumb; he knew perfectly well that Ron was still seething about Hermione going to visit Viktor Krum, especially since she was almost kidnapped. Snape may not have lectured her for what happened, but Ron probably would, Harry thought.

He turned to say good bye to Sirius, but he'd gone already. Then, without warning, the Knight Bus went BANG! again and disappeared from sight. The four of them turned and walked through the kitchen garden, Ginny and Ron carrying Harry's trunk and Harry and Hermione carrying hers. When they were inside the house, Harry was immediately hugged by Mrs. Weasley, and thumped on the back in turn by Mr. Weasley and his sons. Bill was every bit as cool as Harry remembered him, from his long red ponytail and fang earring to his ripped rock-star clothes and dragon-skin boots.

"Hello, Harry. How's it going? And--" Bill suddenly stopped. "Hello, Hermione," Bill said slowly, drawing it out, looking her up and down in a way that Ron and Harry didn't like. She smiled at him and tossed her short curls.

"Hello, Bill. How're the goblins?"

"Oh, annoying as hell. But what you gonna do?" They smiled at each other, and Harry followed her eyes; she was now looking appreciatively at Bill the way he'd looked at her. He wanted to find some way to break this up, but this was so unexpected he was at a loss. Suddenly, Fred and George came bounding over.

"Hey, wow, Hermione! Do you look great!" George said brightly, and Fred gave a loud wolf whistle. All three of them laughed. Both Fred and George didn't mince words; nor did they

skulk around making eyes at girls. They were as straightforward as they came.

Hermione laughed. "Thanks. How've you been?"

"Oh, sod us. What's it like being the girlfriend of a world-famous Quidditch player?" Fred wanted to know. At the mention of Viktor, Ron's face went very dark and he mumbled something and left the kitchen.

"Oh, um, it's fine," she stammered.

Charlie came over to Harry and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "But," he said to the twins, "did Viktor Krum think to fly to get past his dragon? Did Viktor Krum win the Triwizard Tournament?"

Everyone was silent. Then Harry said quietly to Charlie, "I'd rather not talk about that."

Charlie backed off. "Oh, sorry, I've really put my foot in it..."

"Open mouth, insert foot!" Fred and George howled in unison.

"Now, now," Mrs. Weasley said, trying to get her sons to settle down. "Don't pester Harry and Hermione. Let them get settled in their rooms." She turned to Hermione. "And you might not see Crookshanks until the morning, dear. He's out hunting. But he's been good as gold all summer." She levitated the trunks again. "There you go, dears. They'll just about fly up the stairs with you."

Ginny walked up the stairs and Hermione followed with her trunk. Ginny looked over her shoulder at Hermione, making a puzzled face. Ron led Harry up the stairs, glaring at Hermione's back and muttering. Well, thought Harry, so far no one's mad at me. He watched Hermione go into Ginny's room and the door close. He and Ron continued up to the top of the house, to the slightly cramped space that Ron had completely plastered with posters featuring the Chudley Cannons, Ron's favorite Quidditch Team, giving the room a distinctly orange hue.

"Where's Percy?" Harry thought to ask when they were in Ron's room with the door closed. Ron flopped on one of the beds. "On a date. Should be back soon, too, or he'll catch it. Even if he is out of school, Mum says as long as he's still living under this roof--you remember Penelope Clearwater? She was a Ravenclaw prefect?"

"Sure."

"Well, she's in an entry-level position at Witch Weekly, editorial assistant or something. I think her job consists of fetching pumpkin juice for meetings and helping vote for the most charming smile prize; did you notice Gilderoy Lockhart is still winning that every year? They stopped going out for a while after they finished school, but then they ran into each other at a party and they've been together again ever since. She's got her own flat in a village in Dorchester; makes Mum *very* antsy..."

Harry had been sitting on the other bed quietly, trying to pay attention to Ron, but his mind was wandering....

"So what do you think, Harry? Harry?"

"Huh?" Harry said in confusion. "Sorry, I must be tired..."

"I said, are Hermione and Krum still a couple? She told me about his job with the Cannons. Can you believe it?"

Harry considered his words carefully. "Well, she doesn't want to stay with him. She says she doesn't feel about him the way he feels about her." Ron looked pretty happy about this, but like he was trying to hide it. "And she said she doesn't feel safe with him. You know, the whole abduction thing."

"I know!" Ron exclaimed, springing to his feet and pacing back and forth as well as he could

considering that he had to stoop over half the time; he was now over six feet tall, and the slanted ceiling sloped down to four feet at the exterior wall. "He should have been taking better care of her! After all, *he's* of age, he can use magic any time he wants, she can't! What was he thinking?"

Harry didn't tell him that Hermione thought it was possible that Viktor Krum had actually been cooperating with the kidnappers. "Yeah, well, she said that Snape reamed him out about that already."

"Snape?"

"He was meeting with Sirius in Bulgaria. And he brought Hermione and her parents to my house. You should have seen me jump when I opened the door and saw him there."

Ron laughed. "Yes! I wish I could have seen your *face*!" He held his stomach and rolled onto the bed, then sat up and looked at Harry again. "So, she's going to break up with him."

He explained Hermione's predicament to him, and the plan for the dates to become more like group outings. "I told her I'm in. Do you think you and Ginny can come too, and maybe Fred and George?"

"Probably. Except for George. He's going with Angelina now."

"Angelina? Didn't she go to the Yule Ball with Fred?"

"Yeah, and they went out a little after that, but then one time the two of them swapped--you know, a twin thing, just to be funny--and it turned out she liked George better. Fred was cool about it."

"Do they still--swap?"

"Don't know. Angelina would know, though. She obviously saw some kind of difference between them, to decide she liked George better."

Harry suddenly felt very tired. "Are we leaving early for Diagon Alley?" He undressed and got into his bed. Ron did likewise.

"Right after breakfast. Floo powder. But it shouldn't take too long. When we get back, let's play some Quidditch; with Bill and Charlie here, we can have four to a side, if Hermione plays."

"You think she will? She hates riding on broomsticks. And wouldn't Ginny have to play, too?"

"Oh, Ginny'll play. You've never seen her play, have you?" Harry shook his head. Ron grinned, but immediately looked like he was trying hard not to. Harry wondered why. "Well, good night," he said abruptly, switching off the light.

* * * * *

Chapter Five The Ringer

The next morning, they all kept bumping into each other while preparing to go to Diagon Alley. After they'd eaten, they each had to step into the kitchen fireplace one by one after Mrs. Weasley had thrown in a pinch of floo powder, then they had to yell loudly, "Diagon Alley!" and make sure they got out at the right grate. Mrs. Weasley was staying at home with Charlie; Bill was accompanying them on their shopping. He went first, followed by Ron, Ginny, Harry, George, Hermione and Fred. Mr. Weasley and Percy had already apparated to work at the Ministry of Magic; they'd had to walk out to the lane to do it, though, since the house was now an apparition-free zone.

They all landed with a thump in Madam Malkin's robe shop. Hermione was the only one who

didn't need all new robes; she just wanted one nice one for feasts and dates.

"I haven't grown any taller in the previous year," she sighed. "I guess I've just *stopped*..."

"You look fine to *me*," Bill told her smiling. Hermione turned away, reddening. Harry got a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach and felt, for the first time since he'd known him, an almost irresistible urge to kick Bill in his dragon skin boot-covered shins.

George and Fred were going into their seventh year. "We should look really naff, last year," Fred said. "Go out with a bang." They had the Triwizard Tournament winnings Harry had given them, and they'd invested some of it, to make sure they wouldn't spend it and it would be there for them when they finished school (their father's idea). But some of it they *did* just want to spend. Fred and George started looking at the nicest robes in the shop, and Harry joined them, thinking that it *would* look better for his prefect badge to be on some really nice robes...He hadn't mentioned being a prefect--nor had Hermione--since arriving at the Burrow. After the way Percy had behaved while a prefect, he didn't want the Weasleys to think he was full of himself. Harry felt Ron's eyes on him while he and Ginny sorted through the second-hand robes; both of them had grown quite a bit in the previous year. Ginny towered over Hermione. But first, Harry needed to get some money out of the bank. He told Bill he was going to Gringott's, and Bill started to come with him. Harry stopped him. "Shouldn't you stay with them?"

Bill looked back and forth between Harry and his siblings, torn. "Listen," Harry said. "I'll be at Gringott's. You work there. Goblins all over the place. I'll be fine. Stay with them," he said, nodding at Hermione and the others. Bill relented and nodded at him.

"Hurry back."

He did, and then stood for what felt like an excruciating length of time having his new robes measured. These were by far the nicest robes he'd ever had; looking at himself in the mirror, he felt strangely grown up, and realized he looked even more like his father than ever. I really need that haircut, Harry thought, so I'll look like me instead. The mirror yelled back at him after a time, "All right! All right! You look gorgeous! Sheesh, give it a rest!"

After robes, they went to Flourish and Blotts for their books. In addition to *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5*, and other fifth-year versions of books they'd already been studying for the previous four years, Harry and Hermione also needed *Taking the O.W.L.s: Preparing Yourself for the Worst Experience of Your Life*, by Eglantine Etude. Fred and George gave Ron the copy they'd used (they had shared it) and this year they were going to share Percy's old copy of *Taking the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests (N.E.W.T.s): And You Thought the O.W.L.s Were Bad*, again by Eglantine Etude. Harry also noticed that the *Sweetbriar Publishing Anthology of Muggle Literature* was on the fifth-year list, and he picked up a copy. It had quite a lot in it: plays (Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekhov), some short stories, (The Lottery, Gift of the Magi) and even entire novels (Lord of the Flies, Tess of the D'Urbervilles). He wondered what class it was for; it would make good reading, in any case, Harry thought. It was like a whole library by itself, somehow magically packed into one average-sized book. He noticed that Ron crossed it off his list, but didn't buy it.

When they had replenished their potions supplies at the apothecary, they decided to get lunch at an outdoor cafe. But on the way, they passed Quality Quidditch Supplies. Fred and George stopped, their faces glued to the window glass, then they turned to look at each other, nodded, and told the others to wait for them.

"We'll be right back," said George.

About ten minutes later, Fred and George emerged from the shop carrying four long packages. They handed two of them to Ron and Ginny. "Belated birthday presents! From your loving brothers!" Fred told them.

"My birthday was three-and-a-half months ago," complained Ron. "And you forgot it entirely!" "I hope it's better than my not-belated birthday present..." Ginny began.

"That's what you get for having April Fool's Day for your birthday, Gin," George said. "Open it!"

She and Ron tore the paper off their packages. Inside were brand new, shining Nimbus 2001 brooms. Ginny exclaimed over hers. "The top of the line is the Nimbus 3000 now. And the Firebolt, of course. But these are a damn sight better than what you've been riding," said Fred. "Don't worry; we didn't get ourselves Nimbus 3000's or Firebolts. Ours are the same as yours. Otherwise we couldn't have afforded four of them. These are marked down now."

Ginny hugged Fred and George in turn. "Oh, it's beautiful! Thank you! Thank you!" Then she paused. "Do you have *any* money left now?"

Fred and George looked at each other. "Actually, no. But we could wait until we get home to have lunch..."

"No need," Harry said magnanimously. "Lunch is on me!"

Ron was still staring at his unwrapped Nimbus 2001, open mouthed. "I've never had a new broom before..."

Fred came over to him. "Well, like I said, it's not top of the line, but--"

Ron looked up, his face shining. "I don't care. Thanks, Fred! And you, George!"

His brothers looked at his face and laughed. "You're welcome, Ron," Fred said. Ron was still gazing rapturously at his new broom. Fred cleared his throat. "You sure you two wouldn't like to be alone? A little soft music, some wine..."

They all laughed and Ron colored, putting the packaging back on the broom to protect it. He cradled it in his arms like it was a baby as they walked to the cafe.

They spent a good deal of time at lunch, the seven of them laughing and talking, several overlapping conversations going on simultaneously while they ate. Harry almost didn't notice a very pretty girl with chin-length shining black hair standing next to his chair until he rose to throw out his trash and almost knocked her over.

"Oh! I didn't see you there!" he said to her, trying to recover his balance. It was Cho Chang, the sixth-year Ravenclaw Seeker. Harry recognized some other Ravenclaws, holding shopping bags from Madam Malkin's and Flourish and Blotts, standing a few yards away. "How are you?" he asked her, trying to shut out the feeling of overwhelming guilt again, the image of Cedric's lifeless body....

"Can I talk to you alone for a minute, Harry?" Cho asked him. He looked uncertainly at Bill.

"I'll stay in sight," he informed Bill, and he led her over to an empty table out of earshot of the others. He noticed Hermione and Ginny watching them. "What's up?" he asked her when they were at the empty table.

She took a deep breath, as though what she were going to do took a great deal of courage.

"Harry--on our first weekend trip to Hogsmeade, would you like to go out with me?"

Harry groaned inwardly; a year ago, he'd have given anything to hear her say those words.

Then came the Triwizard Tournament....He drew his mouth into a line, trying to think of the most painless way to let her down, other than the truth. *Sorry, I can't go out with you because every time I see you I suffer from crushing, paralyzing, debilitating guilt on*

account of it's my fault your previous boyfriend is dead.

He cast about for some excuse, some way out of this extremely awkward situation, when he had a sudden brainstorm. "Sure," he said to her. "Only, could we double-date with Viktor Krum and Hermione? Her folks are a little nervous about her dating someone who's already out of school, and this way they won't be alone...."

"Double date?" she echoed, considering this proposal. "Well, all right. I suppose so." She looked over at the other Ravenclaws, who were waving her on. "Oh, I have to be going now. I'll see you on the train?"

"Probably," Harry replied. "Until tomorrow!"

She smiled shyly at him. "Until tomorrow." She rejoined her friends, who huddled around her, obviously getting the lowdown on what happened between the two of them. Harry returned to the table and picked up the bill, getting out his money bag to pay it, since he'd already promised he would. He calmly gave the waitress five gold Galleons; he wanted to leave her a generous tip after what Fred and George had put her through. Bill, meantime, had gotten her name so he could owl her.

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. Finally she burst out at him, "Well? What was all that about?"

Harry smiled at her. "That was me being sneaky. She was asking me out. And I was trying to figure out how to tactfully turn her down--"

Bill was floored; he'd seen how pretty she was. "Why?"

Harry sighed. "Because of blinding guilt. Cedric Diggory was her boyfriend." Bill nodded; Harry went on. "Anyway, I got a great idea then, and I told her I would go out with her, if we double-dated with you and Viktor. You see? You see?"

Hermione frowned. "No."

"We'll fix them up! We'll arrange for them to be alone together a lot--they're both Seekers, they have that in common--and we'll be beastly to them, without actually breaking up with them, and before you know it, Viktor's going to be looking pretty good to her, and Cho's going to be looking pretty good to him, and Viktor will break up with you instead of you having to break up with him, and they'll be together and your problem will be solved!" Harry stopped, breathless. George had his mouth hanging open. "Did I actually hear you say that Hermione doesn't want to be with Viktor Krum anymore?"

"Yes," Harry hissed at him. "But keep it quiet, all of you. If Cho finds out that's why I said I'd go out with her--my name would be mud, and so would Hermione's." Ginny was perplexed.

"But, Hermione, when you wrote to me when you first arrived in Bulgaria, you said--"

"Not now, Ginny!" Hermione whispered, running her finger across her throat. Ginny still looked confused. She turned to Harry.

"So," she said softly, "you don't like Cho Chang anymore?"

"I don't dislike her, but I don't want to go out with her."

"And yet you are."

"Just until we can get her and Viktor thrown together enough times..."

Ginny nodded, but looked unconvinced. Their conversation had gone largely unnoticed except by Hermione. George and Fred were deciding who was going to be on whose team when they returned to the Burrow to play Quidditch after lunch.

"Ron will be a Keeper and Harry can be on his team as Seeker," George said. "They can have Bill for their Chaser and Hermione can be their Beater." Hermione turned her head suddenly

when she heard this.

“Hold on, George, me and broomsticks--”

“You’ll be fine. You can use Ginny’s old Cleansweep. It’s slow as molasses. And as Beater, all you have to do is whack the Bludgers--”

“So I have to fly with *one hand*?” she said, horrified.

“Anyway,” Fred interjected before she could raise any more objections. “That means I get to be Chaser on our team, George can be our Beater, and we’ll take it easy on you gits; it wouldn’t be fair for Charlie to play Seeker, so he’ll play Keeper and we’ll put in Ginny as Seeker.” George and Fred exchanged mischievous looks. What’re they up to? wondered Harry. Ginny herself looked like she was bursting, too. Charlie must be an unbeatable Keeper, thought Harry. Well, it all comes down to who gets the Snitch...

* * * * *

“One-hundred to nothing!” Bill cried triumphantly as he put the Quaffle past his younger brother Charlie for the tenth time. Then he screamed and swerved out of the way as a Bludger came hurtling at him from Hermione’s paddle.

“Dammit, Hermione!” he hollered. “For the last time, we’re on the same team!”

“Oops!” she yelled from the other end of the field. “Sorry!” She had been blindly whacking Bludgers all game, most of the time in the direction of Harry, Ron and Bill, it seemed, although Fred and Ginny had had some near misses. Harry flew in circles near where Ron was playing Keeper, hovering in front of the middle of the three hoops. He scanned the field, looking for the Snitch. Ginny didn’t seem to be paying much attention at all. She was laughing at something George had said, and the two of them were chiding Charlie. To Harry’s confusion, it turned out that Charlie was a terrible Keeper. And Ron was a great one. Granted, Fred was playing Chaser for them, and he didn’t do that on the school team; he usually played Beater, alongside George. But Fred had gotten off some nice shots that looked guaranteed to give the other team some points, and Ron had intercepted every one of them. Harry was impressed. He was starting to wonder at the way that Fred had distributed the players, however. Hermione was a menace, mostly to her own teammates, but Bill was quite impressive as a Chaser and Ron seemed to be unbeatable as a Keeper. Meanwhile, every Quaffle got past Charlie, George was a good Beater, but having to spend half his time ducking wild Bludgers coming from Hermione, and Fred wasn’t up to getting a Quaffle past Ron at all. That left Harry as Seeker on his team, and Ginny on the other team. Why didn’t Fred claim me for his team? he wondered...

And then he blinked, and suddenly, there was Ginny, flying around the field, holding the struggling Snitch over her head in triumph, her face glowing, and Fred, George and Charlie hooting with delight.

“That’s one-fifty to one-hundred, our game!” cried Fred, laughing.

Harry stared at Ginny. Her long red hair flew out behind her, she looked like she couldn’t stop smiling if she tried, and he felt a grin creeping over his own face somehow, even though he wasn’t used to losing at Quidditch. Hermione looked at him with narrowed eyes.

They played three more times, and each time, although Harry’s team was up by more than one-hundred points, Ginny grabbed the Snitch and won for the other side. Harry never saw it until it was clutched in her hand.

It was almost time for dinner, and they would have to get up early the next day to go to London (Ministry cars were being provided), so they decided to stop playing. George, Fred, Charlie and Ginny couldn’t stop laughing. Bill clapped Harry on the shoulder. “I should have warned

you," he said to Harry. "Or I should have insisted on changing teams..."

"What?" Harry was confused.

"Well, I figured, it was you, Harry. If anyone could beat her, I thought you could, after seeing you get past that dragon last year. And I knew Ron was unbeatable as a Keeper..."

"You mean--"

"Ginny's a ringer!" Fred howled with glee.

"Sorry, Harry. It was too funny seeing the look on your face--" Charlie guffawed.

George put his arm around Harry's shoulder. "You see, Harry," George started to explain in what Harry thought of as his spiffing-wot-wot imitation-Percy voice, "Ginny is a ringer. A natural Seeker, like Charlie. She can do it with her eyes shut and in her sleep. You never had a prayer."

"What do you mean, like me?" asked Charlie. "I've never beaten her." Ginny blushed. "But she's not interested in playing at school."

"All those people watching..." she whispered shyly, not looking at Harry.

"Oh!" yelled Fred, sounding like Hermione when she was trying to get a teacher to call on her who was ignoring her (usually Snape). "Oh, oh, oh!"

"What's with you?" Bill snarled at him.

"I just realized; Oliver's out of school now, and with the Triwizard Tournament last year, there wasn't any Quidditch, so we didn't have to think about it, but we need a new captain and a new Keeper for the Gryffindor team!"

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I forgot all about that..."

"And you can be the new captain, Harry!" Fred cried triumphantly.

"Me? What about you?"

"Oh, I don't want the responsibility. Rousing people out of bed for early morning practice, boring people silly with strategy sessions..."

"And you think *I'd* be any good at that? I never even gave much thought to strategy; I usually just keep an eye out for the Snitch..."

"But, Harry, you have clout! We'd have for our captain Harry Potter, who defeated You-Know-Who! Harry Potter, winner of the Triwizard Tournament! Come on, Harry--"

"Okay, okay. But--who actually decides who's captain of the team, anyway?"

"The other players. George and I will vote for you, and we'll tell the others to. I don't think Alicia wants it; she's Head Girl, already has enough to do. And Angelina and Katie probably wouldn't want it, so that leaves you."

"Of course, we still need a Keeper--"

"As captain, you can pick who the new Keeper is."

Harry smiled at Ron. "Then I pick Ron. How about it, you want to? Of course, it won't be official until I'm elected captain, but it sounds like Fred and George have thought of everything."

Ron didn't jump immediately at the chance, though. "Well--it's not that I don't want to be the Keeper, but when I play, I also like to be Chaser. I'm also pretty good at that, not to brag--"

"Well then," Harry thought fast, "you can be Keeper, but you can also be a reserve Chaser, in case anything happens to one of them. Then--I can be reserve Keeper and--" he trailed off, trying to flesh out the playing roster in his mind. Then he had a sudden inspiration. "And Ginny can be the reserve Seeker!"

Ginny jerked her head up, opening her mouth to protest, then catching sight of the pleading look on Harry's face. She closed her mouth, and she and Harry looked at each other; he didn't mind

looking at her for as long as it took to get her to say--.

“All right,” she said softly. “I’ll do it.”

Harry threw his arms around her and picked her up in a twirling hug, like when he’d gotten off the Knight Bus the previous evening. When he put her down, she was redder than he’d ever seen her, trying hard not to look deliriously happy, and failing horribly. Hermione looked like she had steam coming out of her ears. She turned her back on them all and trudged back to the Burrow without speaking to anyone.

“What’s with her?” Ron said, watching her go.

Chapter Six

Hermione’s Reputation

The next morning, they piled into the Ministry cars and were driven to King’s Cross station in London. One by one, they casually walked through the barrier between platforms nine and ten in order to reach the magically hidden Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. Harry, Bill and Hermione were the only ones who still needed to go through when suddenly, a tall figure appeared as if out of nowhere, walking flat-footed and stoop-shouldered.

“Viktor!” Hermione exclaimed in surprise, trying to look pleased. She looked sideways at Bill and Harry as though begging them to save her.

“Herm-own-ninny, there you are! I came to see you off...”

“Oh, how nice...” she stammered. “Well, I was just about to go through the barrier. I suppose we could both do it.” Viktor Krum took her hand and they calmly walked toward the barrier, then vanished. Then Harry and Bill walked forward together, Harry hauling his trunk on a station trolley and carrying Hedwig’s cage in his other hand.

Then suddenly they were all on the platform, where the Hogwarts Express sat waiting, gleaming in the sunshine, beautiful and regal. The train platform was swarming with students in their robes, hauling trunks and owl cages and cat carriers, being hugged and kissed by their parents. Fred and George found their friend Lee Jordan, and disappeared into his compartment. Harry and Hermione claimed a compartment with Ron and Ginny, all of them dragging their own trunks except for Hermione, whose trunk was being handled by Viktor Krum. Then they all went back out onto the platform again to say goodbye to Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Charlie. Mrs. Weasley hugged and kissed Fred and George, who slipped away from her as soon as possible (this was embarrassing when you were seventeen) and then Ron, who had to stoop quite a bit for his small mother to reach his cheek, then Ginny, who didn’t have to stoop as much as Ron. She gave Hermione a hug and kiss, too, and finally turned to Harry.

“You look so much like your father--” she started to say, and Harry saw there were tears in her eyes. “If only your parents could see you, prefect and all--” Harry leaned over and hugged and kissed her quickly, to prevent her saying any more. He felt tears prickling behind his eyelids himself. He often thought of his parents at times like this, but didn’t like to talk about it. When she had released him, Bill shook his hand and Charlie slapped his back.

“Be safe,” Bill told him, suddenly looking very serious. Harry nodded at him.

Charlie smiled at him. “Would have been nice if one of my brothers had become Gryffindor Quidditch captain, followed in my footsteps, but--I can’t very well complain if it’s Harry Potter instead, can I?”

Harry laughed. “I’ll try to do a good job.”

“No you won’t. You’ll get the damn Quidditch Cup!”

“No pressure, though,” Bill said, elbowing Harry in the ribs. Harry smiled at them, then turned to get back on the train. Hermione was still further down the platform, talking to Viktor Krum. Harry stepped onto the train and stood in the corridor, looking out the window at the Weasleys and waving.

“Potter!”

He turned; Draco Malfoy was striding down the corridor toward him, wearing robes even nicer than the nicest ones in Madam Malkin’s shop, which Harry and the twins had bought. Must be custom tailored, he thought. Figures. Pinned to Malfoy’s robes was a silver badge with a P on it for prefect; Harry’s was still in his trunk with his new robes. Harry folded his arms across his chest and glared at Malfoy. For once, Crabbe and Goyle weren’t with him.

“What’re you doing here? The prefects are up front, four private compartments. Get with the program! You’re a disgrace to the other prefects!”

“What, because I’m not snooty enough? I’m fine where I am.”

Then he felt Malfoy’s eyes on his arms; Harry was wearing yet another black sleeveless T-shirt, Sandy curled around his left upper arm. “What have you been doing, lifting weights or something?”

“Just honest work.”

“Hmm. Manual labor. How Muggle!” Then he pointed to Sandy. “What’s that?”

“Ever heard of a snake, Malfoy? It’s only the symbol of your house.”

“I mean, is it a pet?”

“No. Sandy is my friend. You don’t make a pet of someone you can have conversations with.” He let this sink in.

“Oh, right,” Malfoy finally said. “Parselmouth. Hmm. You-Know-Who has his own snake, I’ve heard. Bit bigger than that puny thing, of course...” Suddenly he stopped and looked out the window onto the platform. Ron and Ginny had come out into the corridor, too, and they also looked out the window.

“Blimey,” was all Ron said. They all stared. Hermione had started to leave the platform to board the train again, but Viktor Krum had caught her hand and pulled her to him. He put his arms around her and leaned over her, tilting her head up and then joining his mouth to hers. She seemed like she was trying to get away at first, but then she appeared to relax into the kiss, putting her arms around his neck, clearly opening her mouth as Viktor held her face up to his, kissing her deeply. Harry’s mouth went dry, and Ron’s and Malfoy’s mouths were hanging open stupidly. Only Ginny looked unsurprised.

Then the train started to move, and Hermione broke the kiss, running to hop on. Viktor Krum stood, holding his hand up in a goodbye wave, looking very much stricken at the sight of her leaving. When Hermione stumbled into the corridor, she froze, meeting the gaze of perhaps a dozen students who had beheld the dramatic goodbye kiss between her and the star of the most recent Quidditch World Cup. Her mouth worked soundlessly and she reddened. Finally, it was Malfoy who spoke.

“It’s a definite improvement, Granger,” he drawled, looking her pointedly up and down. Ron started to pull out his wand, but Harry decided that something else would be faster than magic, and he turned to Malfoy and pushed him down onto the floor of the corridor, kneeling on his chest and putting his right arm across Malfoy’s neck. Malfoy gasped.

“You’re cutting off my air,” he wheezed, trying to reach his wand, but giving up and then just

trying to remove Harry's arm from his throat and failing. The other students in the corridor pressed against the wall to let someone pass. It was Alicia Spinnet, wearing her Head Girl badge on new robes, looking very stern.

"Potter! Malfoy! Break it up!" Harry removed his arm from Malfoy's throat and rose, generously extending a hand to help Malfoy up. He ignored it at first, but then after struggling unsuccessfully to rise, took it reluctantly and let go of Harry's hand as quickly as possible once he was on his feet. He clutched at his throat. Alicia stepped closer to them so she could speak more quietly; but it was a scary sort of quiet. "You are both prefects!" she whispered fiercely. "You are supposed to set an example!" She sounded frighteningly like Professor McGonagall. "Malfoy!" she barked. "Get back to your compartment!" She stepped aside so he could go past; he looked over his shoulder at Harry, resentment smoldering in his eyes, still with his hand to his throat. Alicia saw. "Go!" she said again, and Malfoy picked up speed this time, rudely pushing aside other gawkers still in the corridor and not looking back again (between the platform kiss and the brawl, many of them seemed to have become planted where they stood). Alicia looked a little less stern now, but only a little. "Harry, do I already have to take points from my *own house*?"

Harry had the good grace to look abashed. "No, Alicia."

"Right, then. Are you and Hermione coming? We have private compartments up front for prefects. One for each house."

Harry turned and looked at Hermione, who was still standing in the corridor. "Um, no, I don't think so. We're fine back here."

"Oh. Well, maybe it's just as well. Keeping you away from Malfoy, I mean. Our first meeting is Sunday night at eight-thirty in the anteroom just off the Great Hall. Don't be late!" She was standing very close to him; Harry looked down into her face; she seemed to be trying to talk with her eyes, they looked--pleading somehow. Then she shook herself, as though waking from a dream, and turned and swept down the corridor toward the front of the train, again looking every bit Head Girl. *What was that?* Harry wondered. The remaining gawkers moved out of her way, then turned to stare at Hermione again. Hermione colored once more and ducked into their compartment. Ron, Ginny and Harry followed.

Ginny and Hermione sat on one side of the compartment, Harry and Ron on the other.

Hermione took Crookshanks from his carrier and settled him on her lap, stroking his orange fur and looking like she was trying to calm down.

"I wish he hadn't done that," she said quietly.

"Do you mean Viktor or Malfoy?" Ginny asked slyly.

"Well, both," she replied, still petting Crookshanks, not looking up.

"I suppose," said Harry looking at her shining brown curls and her tan limbs protruding from her close-fitting blouse and skirt, "coming from Malfoy, that was something of a compliment."

Hermione grimaced. "Malfoy is the last person I want to be getting compliments from. And I still need to get rid of Viktor, remember?"

Ginny smiled slyly. "You didn't look too eager to get rid of him just now on the platform-- and you did say in your letters what a good kisser he is...#148;

"Shut it, Ginny!" Hermione hissed at her, her face red. Ginny was stunned and hurt, her face crumpling, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Well, maybe you *should* sit up front with the prefects! You wouldn't have to put up with *me* then!" And she turned from Hermione and looked out the window at the passing landscape

without seeing it. Hermione immediately looked very sorry.

“Ginny, I’m sorry, I…” she trailed off, seeing that Ginny was having none of it. They’re not getting along too well lately, Harry thought. Hermione sighed.

“Maybe I’ll just take a little nap,” she said quietly, leaning back with her eyes closed and continuing to idly pet Crookshanks. Harry looked at Ron, who was gazing at Hermione with such an unmistakably vulnerable look in his eyes that Harry was shaken at seeing it. Maybe he’ll finally say something to her, he thought. How do I feel about that? He didn’t know. Then he looked at Ginny, and his heart turned over. Poor Ginny; how do I feel about her, now? He wasn’t sure.

It seemed like it was going to be a very confusing fifth year.

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When they finally reached Hogsmeade Station, they had all calmed down considerably. They’d had a chance to visit with some other friends on the train--fellow Gryffindors Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan and the Creevey brothers--as well as some students from Hufflepuff they knew from Herbology class, and the other members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But because he hadn’t gone up to the prefects’ compartments, Harry hadn’t run into Cho Chang, as they’d discussed the day before (she was a sixth-year prefect for Ravenclaw). They all bought way too many sweets and pumpkin pasties, but still left room for the feast that was waiting for them in the Great Hall at the castle.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Harry shared a horseless carriage up to the school. Harry entered Hogwarts castle for the fifth time feeling like he was indeed coming home. I’m more than half done school, he thought. After this year, it’s just two more, and then--And then what? he wondered. Become an Auror? Play Quidditch professionally? That’s if he lived long enough to finish school; now that Voldemort had come back...He tried not to think about all that. One thing at a time. This year I’ve got the O.W.L.s. That’s enough to think about for now.

They entered the Great Hall and settled down at their house tables. Harry felt quite conspicuous in his new robes with his silver prefect badge. He had changed on the train, as had Hermione. Ginny and Ron wore their second-hand robes; Ron’s were fraying at the cuffs.

Hagrid brought in the first-years, stopping to discreetly wave at Harry, Ron and Hermione (well, not that discreetly; Hagrid was huge). After all of the students were seated except them, the sorting began. The sorting hat sang a new song yet again, which had once impressed Harry until it was pointed out to him that it had all year to think of a new one, and precious little else to do.

One by one, rather small-looking boys and girls around eleven years old stepped forward when their names were called, placed the hat on their heads, and were proclaimed Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs or Slytherins. It seemed a very long time since his own sorting.

Crabbe evidently had a little sister--if little could be used to describe Wilhelmina Crabbe, who was the largest eleven-year-old girl Harry had ever seen. She was put in Slytherin; no surprise there. A rather small thin boy with curly blond hair had the unusual name of Flitwick; Harry wondered if he was related to the Charms teacher. Flitwick became a Gryffindor, causing the table to cheer as it had for the previous new members of their house.

In the end, there were eight new Gryffindors, four girls and four boys. In addition to Will Flitwick, they now had Andy Donegal and his twin sister Amy (Muggle-born), Dean Thomas’ younger sister Jamaica; Barry Bagshot, Peggy Patrick and Jules Quinn, from old wizarding families; and Gillian Lockley, another Muggle-born. The newly-sorted students joined their house tables and squeezed in at the benches, looking up at the head table, where Dumbledore

now stood.

“Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts, everyone! I hope all third-year students have turned in their permission slips, or no visits to Hogsmeade! Now, I don’t know what your parents have told you, but--” and here, Harry caught his eye and tried to keep his breathing even. “Hogwarts is one of the safest places you can possibly be. We are here to train you to be the finest witches and wizards anywhere, and we are not in the habit of losing students. That said, I must admit that we did lose a student last year who was competing in the Triwizard Tournament, but his death was not directly connected to the tasks he was required to perform for the competition. He was killed by Lord Voldemort.”

The first year students who were from wizarding families erupted with a loud gasp as though uttered by one throat; the Muggle-born first-years looked quizzical. “As I said, Hogwarts is one of the safest places on earth. We ask that you be especially careful, however, when visiting Hogsmeade, and I reserve the right to cancel Hogsmeade visits with no notice whatsoever and no explanation. If this occurs, please just assume that it is for everyone’s safety and don’t go trying to get around it,” he said, staring at Fred and George, who looked down at their feet. “Also, the Forbidden Forest is still forbidden, hence the name. Don’t forget it!”

“Now! Let’s sing the school song and then eat!” he finished. Everyone stood and prepared to sing. Harry had been practicing to “Londonderry Air” with his new tenor voice, having abandoned “Loch Lomond;” Ron used his quavering baritone for the tune to the national anthem, Hermione was doing “Candle in the Wind,” of all things, and George and Fred were loudly singing in unison to the tune of “Waltzing Mathilda,” so that theirs was the theme that came through the polyglot of noise most prominently; a lucky thing, since it turned out to work with the words surprisingly well.

When the last few singers had finished (there were always some who had to choose a slow ballad) the food appeared on the tables and they all fell to with gusto, despite the sweets many of them had consumed on the train. Young Will Flitwick was seated across from Harry and Ron, and between Hermione and Ginny. “Are you Harry Potter?” he asked, awestruck, looking at the scar on Harry’s forehead. “Are you a prefect?”

Harry looked kindly at him. “Yes and yes. Are you related to Professor Flitwick?”

“He’s my uncle. Great uncle, actually. My granddad’s big brother. Don’t see him much, since most of the year he’s here teaching.” The idea of tiny Professor Flitwick being called “big” was making Harry’s mouth curl up at the edges. He tried to suppress this.

“Bet you’ll do well in Charms.”

“Oh, I doubt it. It’s just not my bailiwick. I’m much more interested in Transfiguration; perhaps I’ll become an Animagus one day.”

Harry and Ron looked at each other, trying not to smile; an eleven-year-old using words like “bailiwick.” Young Will Flitwick promised to be an interesting first-year.

After dessert, they rose to go. Harry wanted to talk to Ron about having a Quidditch practice the next day, which was Saturday; classes wouldn’t actually start until Monday, they had a free weekend right at the start of term. But, it turned out, now that he was a prefect, Harry had other responsibilities.

“Harry, Hermione,” said Alicia, striding over to them. “Please take the first years up to Gryffindor Tower and make sure they’re settled in their dormitories. Answer any questions they might have. McGonagall wants to see me.” She turned and walked off to the head table, where Professor McGonagall was still seated, talking to Professor Vector, Hagrid and Dumbledore.

That's when Harry noticed that Snape hadn't been at the feast.

He didn't have time to ponder this, though, as he had to herd a bunch of first-years upstairs. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady in the pink dress which obscured the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Harry suddenly realized that he didn't know the password. He turned helplessly to Hermione. She sighed and gave the password to the Fat Lady.

"Crenellation."

The portrait swung open and they all scrambled into the common room. It looked as cozy and inviting as Harry remembered it, with overstuffed armchairs scattered all around and a blazing fire in the hearth. He noticed for the first time the rampant Gryffindor lion on the keystone of the arch that formed the fireplace opening.

Hermione took the first-year girls up the spiral stairs leading to the girls' dormitories, and Harry led the boys up the stairs to their dorm. Once they arrived in the room that had been vacated by the seventh-years who had finished school the previous year, there was a sudden frenzied rush to claim the four-poster beds. Harry had to break up a fight between Andy Donegal and Barry Bagshot, who both wanted the bed farthest from the door. He awarded it to Will Flitwick instead, unsure of whether he was really being fair, but he had been unable to figure out any other way to settle it. Then there was a fuss over Jules Quinn's cat, because Andy was allergic and Jules *would* insist that it had to sleep with him. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a prefect, Harry thought. He didn't realize it would involve what amounted to babysitting. He couldn't remember being quite so immature as a first-year. He told Andy to go to the hospital wing in the morning for a magical analgesic to prevent him having an adverse reaction to the cat.

When it seemed that they'd finally settled down, Harry left them, pointing his wand at the candles to extinguish them one by one, looking at the exhausted boys lying tucked up in their beds by the light of the last candle. Then Harry heard Will say softly, "Harry? Could you--just leave that one lit?" Harry nodded and quietly closed the door.

When he returned to the common room, Hermione, Ron and Ginny were sitting in three of four armchairs gathered near the fire; they'd saved him a seat.

"What took you so long? The first-year girls were good as gold for me."

"Well, I had first-year boys, so there you go. There was a fight over who got which bed, over Quinn's cat...you name it. Plus, I've just felt out of sorts all day--can't put my finger on it."

They sat silently for a minute, staring at the fire in exhaustion. "I know," Hermione said suddenly.

Harry had his eyes closed. "What do you know?" he asked lazily, thinking that she was probably going to propose an O.W.L. revision session.

"Why you're feeling out of sorts. You didn't go running today."

Harry opened his eyes and thought for a moment. "You know, I think you're right. It's a bit late now, of course, but I can get up before breakfast tomorrow and do it."

"All right, then. I'll meet you here in the common room at seven for stretching exercises."

"Oh--" Harry began, surprised that she still wanted to do it, but remembering how she looked in the running bra and bicycle shorts, he didn't object. "I suppose," he said, "we could use that sandy path around the Quidditch pitch. Probably be easier on our joints than the pavement back home."

Ron made a face. "Seven in the morning! On a Saturday! You're mad!"

"Just be glad I'm not holding Quidditch practice at that hour! That won't be until after breakfast. You and Ginny'll both come, right?" He looked hopefully at them both. They

nodded. "Good, because Fred and George are free--I talked to them on the train--and they said they'll get Alicia, Katie and Angelina there. We'll meet down at the pitch." Suddenly he had to stop talking and gave a tremendous yawn. "Oh! Those first years were tiring. I think I need bed. Good night."

"Me too," said Ron. "Night, Ginny, Hermione."

The girls said goodnight and then headed toward their own staircase. Harry and Ron went up to their room at the top of the tower, which now had a sign on the door saying "Fifth Years." Neville was already in his bed, snoring, and Seamus and Dean were sitting on Dean's bed looking at Seamus' vacation photos from Australia. Ron glanced at them for a moment, then changed into his pajamas and climbed under the covers. "Seamus got to go to Australia," he said softly, but with an edge to his voice.

Harry had changed into pajama pants, but above the waist wore only his basilisk amulet and Sandy wrapped around his left arm. He glanced at Ron as he got into his own four-poster, muttering, "Sorry." Ron shrugged, trying to act like it didn't matter to him--but clearly it did. He closed the curtains of his bed. Harry closed his own curtains and lay back with his hands behind his head, feeling guilty because Ron was trapped in his house all summer just because he was Harry's friend. And Hermione had almost been kidnapped. When would it end? Harry wondered. But he knew the answer: when Voldemort is dead, or--when I am.

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Harry and Hermione staggered up the steps to the Entrance Hall at eight o'clock the next morning, having spent forty minutes running and ten minutes stretching before and after. Harry had left Sandy under a rose bush in the gardens while they were running, and had collected her again, wearing her wrapped around his arm once more. They dragged themselves up to the third-floor hall and Hermione waved exhaustedly at him, heading toward a portrait of a girl in a very large skirt who had a shepherd's crook and a flock of sheep around her.

"Lemon fresh," she said to the shepherdess, gaining entrance to the prefects' bathroom for girls. Harry trudged up two more flights to the fifth floor, where he headed for the statue of Boris the Bewildered (hopeless during the Goblin rebellion of 1510, Hermione had informed him) and counted four doors to the left of Boris. At that door he said, "Pine fresh," and the door swung open.

As he remembered it, the bathroom was as opulent as a Roman bath, with marble everywhere. Unfortunately, it was not as empty as he remembered it; Draco Malfoy was in the large pool-sized sunken tub, swimming in celadon-green bubbles, his pale hair clinging wetly to his scalp.

"Malfoy! What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I'm a prefect too, remember. What're you looking so grungy and sweaty for? Was it that hard to get here? Lost your way in the castle after four years of school? You'll be really helpful to the first-years, won't you? They'll be giving you directions, probably."

"I was out running, for your information. With Hermione," he added; he was unsure why.

Malfoy smiled lasciviously. "Granger? What, are you thinking of trying to steal her from Viktor Krum? That was quite a show yesterday." He looked at Harry, who was still panting from running; Harry felt adrenaline running through him from the exercise and felt he could actually squeeze the life out of Malfoy today with his bare hands, if he wanted to. "What's the matter; don't I get threatened with bodily harm today? Too tired after running around like a Muggle?"

"Wanting a shower too much, more like," he panted, heading toward the marble partition that separated the showers from the tub area. "And you're just boring me, anyway. Can't you think

of an insult worse than ‘running around like a Muggle?’”

“It’s early. I just woke up. Let me get breakfast, first.” He laughed. Harry placed Sandy carefully in a corner, then stripped and got into the shower. The warm spray was like a blessing, and he lifted his face to it gratefully, as if in prayer. He wondered how Malfoy would have reacted if he could have seen Hermione in her bikini, and then that thought made *him* see Hermione in her bikini, in his mind, and soon he felt like he might need to turn off the hot water and have just a cold shower.

When he was done, he dried off, put Sandy back on his arm, and walked with the towel around his waist to the large wardrobe near the tub. He felt Malfoy’s eyes on him again, and wondered if he’d make any more annoying comments about manual labor. *At least I’m not a pale, skinny git--anymore.* In the wardrobe there were green, blue, yellow and red robes. He removed a fluffy red robe with the Gryffindor lion embroidered over the heart and then put on a pair of the standard-issue black shower shoes kept on the bottom of the wardrobe. He felt like new; all pink and humid, his hair curling on his neck. *Haircut*, he thought again, *must get a haircut.* He carried his clothes to the door of the bathroom with him; Malfoy still hadn’t gotten out of the tub.

“Careful, Malfoy,” he said before leaving, “you’ll never be able to unshrivele your skin. Not that anyone would notice the difference.” Malfoy made a face and moved to pick up his wand, at the side of the tub, but Harry laughed and ran out the door. He walked back up to Gryffindor Tower, smiling and shaking his head. At least Malfoy being a prefect meant that he was with Crabbe and Goyle less often; on his own, he was really quite manageable, Harry thought. He gave the password to the Fat Lady and climbed into the common room. Only Parvati and Lavender were there; since it was Saturday, they were in jeans and T-shirts, rather than black Hogwarts robes.

They looked up at him and stared. Parvati in particular looked flabbergasted.

“Harry,” she said. “You look like you had a good summer.” He realized after a second that she was looking down at his legs (the robe only came down to his knees), which had been strengthened by the running, and were now quite muscular. Then he noticed that Lavender was staring at what was visible of his chest where the robe opened.

He tried to be casual. “Yeah, I guess. Wish I’d had time for a haircut, though. I feel like I need a different look...”

“Oh!” Lavender suddenly said. “Parvati can cut your hair! She’s really good! Does her own dad’s hair!”

Parvati was looking at him as she had when he’d picked her up for the Yule Ball the previous Christmas--before he trod on her feet during the dancing and ignored her, spending the rest of the ball watching Cho Chang with Cedric Diggory.

“Yes,” she said slowly now, squinting her eyes at him, as if trying to see a vision of him with his new haircut. “And it’s a good thing your hair’s already wet. Sit down here,” she said, pulling a wooden chair out from one of the tables they used for schoolwork. He sat down obediently, clutching his sweaty running clothes. He tried to explain what he wanted, and she nodded and said, “That’s exactly what I was thinking. I always thought that would be a much better look on you...” making Harry wonder how many girls at Hogwarts had been expending mental energy thinking about giving him a makeover.

“*Incisio!*” she said, holding up her wand, which suddenly sprouted scissors at the tip. As she worked, Harry watched his hair fall to the floor around him, remembering the times during his

childhood when the Dursleys had tried to cut his hair, and how he had magically willed it to look the same again (not yet knowing he was a wizard). He had been as surprised as the Dursleys that this happened, and had been baffled by receiving punishments for it, as though he'd done it intentionally.

When she was done, she waved her wand again, saying, "*Finite Incantatem!*" The scissors disappeared. "*Imago!*" she said next, and now a mirror sprouted from the wand tip. She handed it to Harry so he could inspect himself. It was exactly as he'd described it to her; short on the sides, but that was okay because he didn't have big ears; oddly small ones, really, with lobes that went straight into his head, instead of hanging down pendulously; shorter on top, too, pushed back and up, so that his forehead was bare, the scar no longer partly hidden. It was front and center now, for all the world to see, and his vivid green eyes seemed more in evidence too, somehow. He put his glasses back on, running his hand through his hair, making it stand up even more.

"Thanks, Parvati! It looks just like I wanted!" He stood and smiled at her, confused by her reaction, which was to blush furiously. She usually giggled--but not now. He suddenly felt that he needed to say something else--something long overdue. "Listen, Parvati, I'm sorry about the way I behaved at the Yule Ball. I was a total prat, and you didn't deserve it." She really had looked beautiful that night, he thought. She smiled and looked at him now with her large dark eyes shining in her flawless coffee-with-cream face.

"That's all right, Harry. I got to go to the Yule Ball with Harry Potter, one of the Hogwarts champions and winner of the Triwizard Tournament. It's something I can tell my grandchildren..."

He looked down at the floor, abashed by her response, then noticed his hair all over it. "Oh, what a mess! Is there a broom?"

"You are so funny sometimes, Harry. But then, you spend each summer with Muggles, so--*Nonhirsutum!*" and with that, she waved her wand and the hair clippings disappeared from the floor, chair and from Harry's shoulders and the running clothes he was holding. He smiled at her again, wondering how he had not noticed before how *enormous* her eyes were, and then climbed the stairs to his dorm, remembering Cho Chang asking him out and Alicia standing very close to him in the train corridor the day before, and wondering whether the girls at Hogwarts had now decided that it was open season on Harry Potter. It certainly seemed that way.

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Harry threw on a sleeveless black T-shirt and black jeans, put on the basilisk amulet and Sandy and went down to breakfast carrying his Quidditch robes and Firebolt. Everyone else was already gone, and when he reentered the common room, even Parvati and Lavender had left. He virtually skipped down to the Great Hall; going running in the morning made him feel *normal* again.

But when he arrived in the Great Hall, he felt anything but normal; as he started to stride over to the Gryffindor table, he felt rather than heard (the vibrations seemed to come through the floor) the murmur of what seemed to be mostly higher-pitched voices--female voices--saying, "Look at Harry Potter--what's Harry Potter done--doesn't he look--oh, my god, do you see Harry Potter--" and he furrowed his brow, sitting down between Ron and Hermione and finding himself facing an amazed-looking Ginny. Next to her George laughed and stuck a piece of bacon in her open mouth, making her sputter and spit it out onto her plate.

"George!"

He laughed. "Sorry, Ginny. But you should have seen your face! And your mouth was hanging open, so--"

"I don't get it," Harry said, looking around the room at the girls craning their necks, even at the Slytherin table. "Hasn't anyone ever heard of a person getting a haircut?"

"Oh," said George casually. "Have *you* cut your hair, Harry?"

Harry threw a muffin at George, who laughed and ducked. "Actually, Parvati did it. She did a pretty good job, I think."

Ginny nodded dumbly, blindly taking a bite of toast. Harry thought her large brown eyes looked slightly unfocussed. Next to him, Hermione said, "She did a *fantastic* job..." looking at him and reaching out to touch his hair dreamily.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled, irritated. She jumped, as if waking up.

George laughed, until Angelina, next to him, agreed with Hermione, saying emphatically, "*That* is an understatement."

"Hey!" George responded, making Angelina laugh now.

Harry felt himself redden as he reached for some toast. "Man, did it look *that* bad before?" He glanced at Hermione, who looked away, coloring, then at Ginny, who was staring at her plate.

"Well, it's not hard to see your scar now," Ron said in a flat voice.

"*And* it's not hard to see your muscles, with that shirt..." Angelina added helpfully. George turned and glared at her, then Harry, but she smiled and leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Oh, you're just too easy, George. And you're terribly cute when you're jealous..."

Breakfast was somewhat uncomfortable for Harry because of the stir he was causing--was it that bad before? he wondered. Hermione mumbled something about the library before running off, looking at him over her shoulder for a second. Ginny avoided meeting his eyes during the rest of the meal, and Harry avoided looking at any other house tables, including while he was leaving the hall, pretending to be rather fascinated with his feet on the way out.

After breakfast, the Gryffindor Quidditch team gathered in the changing rooms next to the field, and officially elected Harry to be their new captain, whereupon, Harry introduced Ron as new Keeper and reserve Chaser and Beater ("What do you think's gonna happen to us?" Fred and George wanted to know), and Ginny as reserve Seeker. "And I'll be reserve Keeper, when necessary," Harry told them. He wanted to put breakfast behind him and be as businesslike as possible. Angelina was treating him normally again (he assumed that a lot of her comments at breakfast had been to needle George), but Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet looked a little distracted. "All right, we all need to practice--and some of us need to practice more than one position. Since there's eight of us, we'll divide up into two teams. The Chasers will have to take turns playing other positions, since we only need one on a team. You'll be one of the Seekers first, Katie, while I play Keeper, Alicia will be your Chaser and Fred will be Beater. Ron, you and Ginny will be the Keeper and Seeker on the other team with Angelina and George. Let's go!"

Once they were playing, having to concentrate on not falling off broomsticks or getting hit by Bludgers, everyone seemed more normal again. Ginny caught the Snitch before Katie, then she caught it before Angelina and then Alicia. Alicia, Katie and Angelina were a bit surprised, but obviously putting it down to the fact that Ginny wasn't competing against Harry. Then he had each of the Chasers take a turn at playing Keeper for the sake of the practice, and now Ron could practice being a Chaser while Harry played Seeker. Still, Ginny caught the Snitch first every time.

After some more practice games with Ron as Beater and Fred and George taking turns as Keeper and Seeker (Harry seriously wondered whether George might need glasses; the Snitch had hovered about a foot in front of him, whereupon Ginny swooped down and grabbed it), Harry ended the practice. As they all left the field, Alicia and Katie looked strangely at Ginny, as though she were an intruder. Angelina put her arm around her and said, "Don't you mind them. George tipped me off how good you are; now I know he wasn't exaggerating! In fact, I think he underplayed it." Ginny smiled gratefully at her, then watched as Angelina and George joined hands and left the rest of the group, walking down toward the greenhouses, smiling at each other and swinging their hands vigorously.

"Where are they going?" Harry asked Ginny as they all continued toward the castle. Ron looked like he wondered too. Fred was up ahead with Alicia and Katie, trying to get them to laugh with very bad puns.

"Where do you think?" Ginny said, frowning.

Harry and Ron simultaneously let out an "Ooohhhhh," as it dawned on them, causing her to shake her head.

"Honestly," she muttered, picking up speed and passing them.

Harry looked at Ron; when had Ginny become so worldly-wise? he wondered. Ron wouldn't look at him. She almost sounded jaded, Harry thought. He remembered how she had giggled about catching Percy kissing his girlfriend Penelope when Harry was in second year and Ginny was in first; but then, she was only eleven at the time. Three years have made quite a difference, Harry thought, watching her walk ahead of him and Ron toward the castle. Quite a difference.

* * * * *

After lunch, Harry, Ron and Hermione went down to Hagrid's cabin to see how he was doing.

"Maybe we can find out what he did in Ukraine," Harry said on the way.

"How do you know that's where he was?" Hermione wanted to know. "That was supposed to be a secret."

"He told me--in not so many words," Harry answered.

"I just hope the giants don't take You-Know-Who's side," Ron intoned with an air of doom.

"Well, I think Hagrid was the perfect ambassador to send to them--and didn't he also take Madame Maxime? I mean, she's headmistress of a very well-regarded school of witchcraft and wizardry. She's got clout," Hermione stated with authority.

Harry looked grim. "I hope you're right."

Hagrid was pleased to see them when they knocked on his door, but all through tea, he managed to deflect any questions about the giants, or even what they'd be studying in Care of Magical Creatures. They came away feeling somewhat flat, but when they'd reached the castle again, Hermione reminded the two of them that they hadn't gone to see Hagrid just to pump him for information--they'd gone to see him because he was their friend.

"And anyway," she went on, "*nothing* could be any worse than Blast-Ended Skrewts. Right?"

"Right," said Harry and Ron feebly; that's what they'd thought about the baby dragon, too.

They just hoped she was right.

* * * * *

"So," Roger Davies said unctuously, standing at the desk where he and Alicia were presiding over the prefects' meeting, "does everyone understand where all of the steps are that need to be skipped and how to extract the feet of students who forget to skip them?" The prefects all groaned assent, dying for the meeting to be over. Even gung-ho Hermione looked like she was

flagging after the two-hour meeting. Two hours? Harry thought. *We've been discussing trick steps and how to change passwords to restricted areas and how to take points from houses based on certain infringements of the rules for two hours?* Actually, they'd discussed more than that, but it was all starting to blur for Harry now. Personally, he thought Roger was just a bit power hungry, and in particular, enjoying the power he had over the prefects to bore them silly for as long as he wanted to. Even Alicia and his own brother, Evan, looked like they wanted to put a hex on him.

"Good," Alicia said quickly. "Do we have a motion to table any further business until the next meeting?"

"So moved!" came the swift reply from Ernie MacMillan, of Hufflepuff.

"Second?"

"Second!" responded a sixth-year Slytherin prefect.

"All in favor?"

"AYE!" replied twenty-two exhausted voices.

"Opposed?"

"But I--" Roger began. Alicia cut him off.

"The ayes have it. I move to adjourn the meeting."

"Second!" came the unexpected voice of Draco Malfoy.

"All in favor?"

"AYE!"

"All right. The meeting is adjourned." She tried to pry the gavel out of Roger's hand to pound it on the desk, and wound up having to put her hand around his and pound it that way. Roger looked deeply offended. Alicia collected the notes from Hermione, who had volunteered to be the recording secretary; Alicia had offered to get her a Quick-Quotes quill for the purpose, but Harry suggested that they weren't very accurate or reliable and tended to embellish a great deal (remembering a particularly disastrous interview with Rita Skeeter), so Hermione opted to do it the old-fashioned way.

As the prefects prepared to leave, Harry noticed Mandy Brocklehurst gazing fixedly at him, and he realized that she played Chaser on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. She had wavy chestnut hair, a sprinkling of freckles over a small nose, and large dark blue eyes which regarded him closely. He looked away, into the gaze of Alicia Spinnet. He was vaguely aware of Hermione and Cho Chang looking at him, too. Okay, he thought, this is getting creepy. He had spent much of the previous day (after returning from Hagrid's) and all of the earlier part of Sunday, except for mealtimes, holed up in his room; at times, even closing the curtains of his four-poster and reading his O.W.L. book by wandlight. Well, he thought, if I have to spend this much time avoiding leering girls, maybe I'll at least get top marks on my O.W.L.s.

"Harry," Alicia said. "Could you stay for a moment after the meeting?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice, in case what came out was, "Could you all please stop staring at me?"

Hermione said casually, "I'll meet you in the entrance hall," and left. Cho Chang and Mandy Brocklehurst also left, somewhat slowly. Alicia sat down in the chair next to him that Hermione had been using. They were the only ones left in the room.

"So, Harry," she said, smiling, sitting, Harry thought, entirely too close. "How's it going so far?" Harry leaned back in his chair, so that it was on the back two legs, trying to be casual. It helped put distance between him and Alicia. "Oh, you know, first year boys are still pretty youn--" and

he was forced to stop as the chair tilted too far back, skidded on the smooth stone floor, and sent Harry crashing in a heap, his feet narrowly missing kicking Alicia in the jaw on the way down. She jumped up with a cry, trying to help him up, but he brushed her off, although it became worse in a moment when Hermione, Cho and Mandy came running back into the room, all trying to help him up at the same time. This was more hindrance than help, and he finally had to yelp, "Geroff!" They stepped back somewhat alarmed; he got to his feet, set the chair right and brushed off his robes, trying to maintain some shred of dignity. Then he nodded at them all and said, "Good night, ladies." He turned to leave, his new robes billowing out behind him as he took the largest strides he could to escape them.

Hermione caught up with him in the entrance hall. She fell into step beside him as he ascended the stairs, two at a time (she had to move quickly to keep up). He thought, I'm probably going to put a foot right through a trick stair tread. He wasn't paying attention at all. He didn't look at Hermione or speak to her. When they reached the portrait, Harry didn't say the password, instead he turned to her and said abruptly, "Why are all of the girls in this ruddy place suddenly acting so strangely?"

Hermione smiled at him, but looked as though she hadn't really heard what he'd said, reaching up to touch his jaw. "You're going to have to shave soon, Harry," she said softly. She traced his jawline with her finger, saying, "You have no idea how attractive you are, do you?" She was practically whispering now. Harry felt his heart beating very loudly, it seemed; he shivered involuntarily at the feel of her finger brushing the new growth along his chin. Suddenly she said very loudly, "Crenellation!" and the portrait swung open. She entered the common room with more dignity than he felt he'd mustered after falling to the floor after the prefects' meeting. She went up to the girls' dormitories without looking back.

* * * * *

Chapter Seven

The Real Moody

When Harry met Hermione in the common room the next morning, she acted as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened the night before. You have no idea how attractive you are, do you? seemed to echo in his head, but Hermione unconcernedly stretched and drank water preparatory to their running. Although it did seem to Harry that she avoided looking him in the eye. Maybe he was just imagining it.

After the morning run, he was actually starting to feel like his life was back on track again. He showered in the prefects' bathroom (ignoring Malfoy in the bath this time, and for once, Malfoy ignored him), then he dressed and ate breakfast. While he ate, he looked furtively around the Great Hall, but by now, people seemed to have gotten used to his new haircut, and he felt able to eat in relative peace and quiet.

Next to him, Ron said, through a mouthful of porridge, "You ready, Harry?"

Harry frowned. Now what? "Ready?"

"For Snape. I've heard he's brutal to fifth years. O.W.L. preparation and all that. We've got him first thing every Monday, Wednesday and Friday."

Harry groaned; he'd forgotten that Potions was first thing after breakfast. "And I thought it was bad to have Double Potions last thing on Friday, before being able to begin the weekend..."

"Yeah, it always seemed to take forever to end. Well, now we get to begin our classes every week with the lovely visage of Severus Snape..."

“Careful, Weasley,” came a drawling voice behind them. “Prefects are supposed to report insubordination to the professors. Aren’t you taking notes, Potter and Granger?”

“We’ll let you do that, Malfoy,” came Hermione’s indignant reply. “And if that’s really what you want us to do, I can take very detailed notes on every time you badmouth Hagrid, who is also a teacher, remember.”

“In name only,” came Malfoy’s reply. Harry and Ron rose together at this insult to Hagrid’s teaching ability--although they secretly agreed, they were Hagrid’s friends. They tolerated the way he ran Care of Magical Creatures out of staunch loyalty, but neither of them would have minded if Hagrid had suddenly become obsessed with kittens and puppies.

“Harry! Ron!” came Hermione’s dangerous voice, as though she were prepared to announce that she was taking points from Gryffindor for their behavior. Harry picked up his bulging bag. “Don’t worry, Hermione,” he told her. “We should be getting down to the dungeons, anyway. And he’ll get his when we play Slytherin at Quidditch.” He smiled at Ron, who nodded in agreement. Then Harry turned to go, catching Ginny’s eye and winking at her, making her turn as red as her hair and look down at her plate.

* * * * *

Harry’s first Potions class as a fifth-year was a complete disaster. Everything he’d been reading about during the summer seemed to have left his head, and Snape made a joke that the Slytherins (the males anyway) greatly appreciated, about whether some of Harry’s brains had been snipped off along with his hair. Harry had to remind himself of the ludicrous image of Snape in safari clothes standing in his front hall just to keep from getting angry enough to put a hex on him. And Hermione had said he’d reamed out Viktor Krum for not taking better care of her...Oh, well. Anyone who didn’t like Viktor Krum couldn’t be all bad, he had to keep reminding himself. On the other hand, he had noticed, but had not mentioned to Ron and Hermione, that Snape hadn’t been at the staff table during a single one of the meals they’d had since arriving back at school Friday night. Where had he been? Harry wondered.

When they were leaving the dungeon to go to Charms, Harry said, “I’ve made a decision.” This sounded very official, so Hermione and Ron stopped and listened with puzzled looks on their faces. “I refuse to let that man humiliate me in class one more time. I am going to practically live in the Potions dungeon if that’s what I have to do to get full marks in Potions on the O.W.L.s.” Hermione smiled and nodded. “Good for you, Harry! I mean to do a lot of extra work myself to prepare.”

Ron made a face. “That’s all right for you two. I’m never going to beat Percy and Bill each getting twelve O.W.L.s, so there’s not much point in trying. And I could probably beat Fred’s and George’s pitiful showing with what I know now, so I’ve decided not to put too much pressure on myself. It’s just not worth the insanity.”

Hermione scowled at him. “You have no ambition, Ronald Weasley. You should be ashamed of yourself! Fat lot of good it’s done Percy, even being Head Boy, when he couldn’t recognize that his own boss was under the Imperious Curse and he was being sent instructions by a dark wizard! You know as well as I do that Percy’s just a sycophant, and that you’re worth a dozen of him!” Hermione’s face was flushed, and she stomped up the steps ahead of them, leaving Harry and Ron to stand looking after her with their jaws on the floor.

“What was--” Ron began. But Harry shook his head.

“Don’t ask. You wouldn’t believe the things that have been coming out of her mouth lately...”

Ron looked as though he thought this was some kind of double-entendre (which maybe it was,

thought Harry). “Like what?” he wanted to know.

“I already said: don’t ask.” And Harry followed Hermione up the steps leading out of the dungeon, a puzzled Ron following closely behind.

Professor Flitwick was delighted to see the fifth-year Gryffindors; he was usually pretty jovial, and seldom looked irritated, even when Neville Longbottom had repeatedly sent the tiny wizard sailing across the classroom while learning Banishing Charms. He outlined for them a long list of charms they would be learning, plus reviewing all of the work they’d done the previous four years, for it would all be on the O.W.L.s. *Five years of work*, thought Harry. It was a lot to be tested on all at once.

It was a relief to relax at the Gryffindor table and eat lunch, but it seemed to end all too soon, and then they were off to Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall. They knew they could count on her being very stern about the upcoming tests, and she did not disappoint them.

Stalking around the class, warning them of what they would have to remember from this and the previous four years, Neville looked practically in tears, and even Hermione looked nervous and unsure of herself, and she’d been the top Transfiguration student from the first day of their first year.

When class was over, Harry opted to stay behind. “Can I talk to you a bit, Professor?”

She looked a bit less stern now that class was over; after all, she was his head of house, and had selected him to be a prefect. She had also been glad to hear that he was now the captain of the house Quidditch team. “Yes, Potter?”

“I was wondering--when did you become an Animagus? Were you still in school?”

She nodded. “As a matter of fact, I was in my sixth year. I was tutored by the headmaster himself--although he was not the headmaster, yet. He was our Transfiguration teacher. Why?”

“Well, I was wondering--I was considering whether to try to become an Animagus myself, someday.” Was he? He wondered. Or was it that hearing young Will Flitwick talking about it got his mind working?

“Were you, Potter?” McGonagall’s eyes flickered with interest. “Fascinating. I would have thought perhaps Miss Granger would be interested, but you---?”

“Well, I don’t remember whether Professor Dumbledore said you knew this or not--and it’s not like he can get in trouble now--but, were you aware that my father was an unregistered Animagus?”

She pursed her lips. “Yes. I know about that. And I know why. And although he was obviously very talented at it, that doesn’t make it right...”

“I know, I know,” he interrupted her, before he got an encore of the performance Hermione had told him about, her explaining to Rita Skeeter the reasons for Animagi to be properly registered. “That’s why I’m coming to you. I want to do everything right. I want to find out--how soon I could start learning. Do I have to wait for sixth year? Or seventh? Do I have to be of age?”

“Although it is usually recommended that a student have a little more magical education than you currently possess, I admit this is you we are talking about, and you managed to win the Triwizard Tournament as a fourth-year...” she looked at him thoughtfully. “And, I suppose that with your father’s history, you may turn out to be a natural, plus you do have a compelling reason for wanting to cultivate this particular skill,” she added, without saying *Voldemort*. Harry could tell she was thinking it. She regarded him silently for another minute.

“Very well,” she finally said. “I will discuss it with the headmaster. I will let you know what he

decides. You'd better go; Professor Moody won't appreciate you being late for class.”

“Yes, Professor. Thank you,” he said, nodding at her. She almost cracked a smile and looked at him with an affection in her eyes she had not meant to show but could not disguise. He ran through the corridors, light-hearted; he hadn't even known before he'd asked her that that was what he was going to say, it was as if it had come up out of his subconscious and burst upon his lips, an idea that was fully born. But no, he thought. That's not true. I've really been thinking it for more than a year, ever since I conjured that Patronus that looked like my dad as a stag. Ever since then, I've wondered whether I could do the same thing.

He quickly reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. This would be his first class with the real Mad Eye Moody. The other fifth-year Gryffindors were still standing in the corridor, for some reason. They seemed nervous about entering. After all, during the entire previous year, they'd been taught by a dark wizard in disguise and had not suspected a thing. *Dumbledore* had not suspected a thing until the man they had all thought was Moody had taken Harry to his office after he returned to Hogwarts with Cedric Diggory's body, going on about Voldemort being back, having his body back, Wormtail resurrecting him, the Death Eaters being called to him....

Harry peeked around the doorway into the classroom. Moody had his back to them, sitting at the teacher's desk, his hands folded, seemingly staring into space. Then he growled, “Are you all going to come in or am I going to lecture to an empty classroom?” Harry realized he'd probably seen them through the back of his skull with that eerie magical eye, and then Harry remembered that the eye could not only see through many, many solid objects, but also through invisibility cloaks.

They filed in then and took their seats, taking out textbooks they had on the Dark Arts and parchment and quills and ink bottles. Moody seemed to be examining the empty desktop in front of him and did not look up at them--at least, with his normal eye. There was no preamble. “Many of you,” he growled--he always seemed to growl--” may be under the impression that you know me because you think I taught you last year. **WRONG!**

“You may or may not know that that was an impostor, whose real name was Barty Crouch, Jr. Most people in the world thought he had been dead for the last thirteen years, but his father and his house elf knew better. His father--who was killed by his own son--thought he could oversee his imprisonment better than the dementors at Azkaban, kept him under the Imperious Curse, made him hide under an Invisibility Cloak. But it didn't *work*, DID IT?”

Every student in the class jumped in his or her seat. Moody finally looked up from the bare desktop. Harry realized he was probably reading notes for the lecture in the top drawer of the desk, which he was now able to follow with his magical eye. One by one his normal eye lit on each student.

“Can anyone tell me **WHY** it didn't work?”

Hermione and Harry and Ron raised their hands, joined timidly by Neville.

“Longbottom!” Moody cried.

Neville swallowed. “Because you can learn to overcome the Imperious Curse, with practice.”

“**EXACTLY!**” Moody now positively bellowed. Harry, Ron and Hermione lowered their hands again. Lavender and Parvati moved their chairs back from their desks several inches. Although they all had had their quills poised over their parchment, ready to take notes, no one had as yet written a word.

“So--if the Imperious Curse can be overcome with practice, why put it on someone to begin

with, why use it to control someone? Why do it at all?"

Was he kidding? Harry thought. He was asking them *why* someone would use one of the three curses that were guaranteed to give a person a life sentence in Azkaban? Silence reigned in the room.

"Come on!" Moody bellowed. "Why do it? Why control someone, making them torture and kill Muggles, why do it? Why do dark wizards do it? WHY?"

They all looked at him, and at each other. Finally, Neville timidly raised his hand again.

"Longbottom!"

Neville looked like it was taking every ounce of bravery he possessed to answer. "Because they can."

"BECAUSE THEY CAN!" Moody cried, smiling. He looked extremely unnatural, smiling. It passed mercifully quickly. "Because they can!" he repeated at a lower volume. "Ten points for Gryffindor!" Neville tried not to look pleased, and failed. He looked sideways at Hermione, who smiled at him. He averted his eyes quickly, looking terrified again.

"Is that a good reason?" he demanded of them. No one answered again. He waited what he felt was a reasonable amount of time, then said, "NO! There IS no good reason! Because you can! Any one of you could fly on your broomstick around Buckingham Palace and scare the living daylights out of the queen, but does that mean you should? NO! I could turn each and every one of you into newts, but does that mean that I should?" This time he did not answer his own question. Silence. He smiled again. "Well. That all depends on how you do on your assignments." He was still smiling; the students all looked at each other with alarm. "JOKE!" he shouted suddenly, giving a brief cackle.

Harry started to laugh, then caught himself. Ron was looking like his cheeks hurt from stifling a smile. Hermione frowned at them. Moody strode over to Harry and Ron. "Go ahead! Laugh! It's all right, Potter and Weasley. You too, Granger. I've heard about you three; you've seen more than your fair share of evil close up. It's not just boggarts can't stand laughter! You have to be able to look evil in the eye sometimes and laugh!"

Suddenly he was abruptly sober. "But some things are NOT funny. Take Muggles; who do you feel is more powerful, wizards or Muggles?"

Seamus Finnigan raised his hand and Moody nodded at him. "Wizards," he said confidently.

Moody walked around his desk, nodding and rubbing his chin, then turned on Seamus and bellowed, "WRONG, Finnigan! You come from a wizarding family, don't you?" Seamus nodded. "Thomas! Granger! Potter! You grew up in the Muggle world, didn't you?" The three of them nodded. "Name me some things Muggles have done over the centuries to torture each other and make each other miserable!"

Harry knew that Dean Thomas' family had come to England from Jamaica about thirty years earlier; presumably, sometime before that--probably hundreds of years before--they had come from Africa.

"Slavery," Dean said evenly.

"Oppressing women," Hermione said, not without indignation.

"War," Harry ventured.

"Nuclear war," Hermione added.

"Drugs."

"Automatic weapons."

"Chemical weapons."

“Concentration camps.”

“Ghettos.”

“Apartheid.”

“Ethnic cleansing.”

“The Cold War.”

“Genocide.”

“Yes,” Moody said. “Genocide. Killing an entire race. Or what passes for race on this planet. In truth, there is one race: the human race. The genetic variations between people of different ethnic groups across the world are negligible. Even those of us who are born with some magic in us aren’t appreciably different from those who aren’t. It’s just another characteristic like hair or eye color, right or left handed.

“But no matter what atrocities dark wizards have visited on this world, I am here to tell you that none of them--NONE--have even approached the number of casualties that were suffered by those who were at Agincourt--and I’m talking about the French, who experienced REAL losses. And THAT was hundreds of years ago. There has never been a wizarding equivalent of Waterloo, of the American Civil War, of the Boer War, of World War I or II, of Vietnam or any of the conflicts in the Middle East, or Northern Ireland. All of the goblin rebellions combined didn’t have the carnage experienced by the Anzacs who went over the top at Gallipoli. Worse than decimation. Losing only ten percent of the men would have been a vast improvement. Do you know how many humans have died in these conflicts, and more?”

No response. Moody paced back and forth for a couple of minutes, staring at the floor. Then he erupted into questions again. “Just because Muggles can blow up the entire planet, does that mean that they should? Just because they have antibiotics to fight disease now, does that mean they should use them for everything? It turns out they shouldn’t--strains of diseases that are resistant to all known antibiotics have mutated and are proliferating around the world.

“JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN’T MEAN YOU SHOULD.”

They all jumped in their seats. Moody stomped up the aisle between the desks, his wooden leg very loud, looking at each of them as though he were surprised they hadn’t all flunked out of school by now. “What,” he finally went on, “have you learned in your last four years in Defense Against the Dark Arts?”

“Grindylows.”

“Boggarts.”

“Hinkypunks.”

“NO!” he barked. “You haven’t learned ANYTHING! What you need to learn now--before you sit for your O.W.L.s--is that fighting the Dark Arts does not mean fighting the darkness OUTSIDE of you, it means fighting the darkness INSIDE you!”

He went back to his desk and stood beside it, surveying them all with his magical eye. “What is the purpose of the Cruciatius Curse?” he said softly.

Hermione immediately raised her hand. “To hurt someone, of course.”

“WRONG!” He had turned the volume back up. Ron and Harry looked at her, alarmed.

Hermione wasn’t accustomed to this kind of reaction from a teacher. She sank down in her chair somewhat cowed, and Harry wouldn’t have been surprised if she didn’t say another word in Defense Against the Dark Arts all year.

Neville timidly raised his hand and Moody nodded at him. “To break someone and make them do what you want them to do.”

“To control someone,” Moody said, nodding, speaking in a normal (for him) conversational voice, as though he hadn’t just shouted at Hermione loud enough to wake the dead. “In some ways, it is not as sure as the Imperious Curse, but in some ways it’s better. A person who is really concentrating, who has an extremely strong sense of self, can withstand the Imperious Curse. But the same person may cave in seconds of experiencing the Cruciatu s Curse. Most people would turn around and put the same curse on another person in a heartbeat if they were promised that they would not have to feel that pain again. THAT’S THE DARKNESS INSIDE YOU.”

Hermione turned and looked at Neville, giving him a little smile to show that she was impressed. Neville blushed deeply and looked down at his blank parchment.

“I’ll wager,” Moody went on, “that none of you has ever experienced the Cruciatu s Curse. First you feel--”

But Harry had slowly raised his hand. Moody stopped and stared at him. “Really, Potter? Was the person caught?”

“No, sir.”

“Does the Ministry know about this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well? I’m out of the loop these days.”

“Voldemort.”

A couple of people had gasped, but the rest of the class was otherwise silent when Harry said the name. Moody nodded at Harry. “Good. You said it. Say it again.”

“Voldemort.”

“Again.”

“Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort!”

Moody walked around the room, his wooden leg clunking, his normal eye looking at the ceiling.

“How many times?”

“Twice.”

“What happened?”

“Well, first he did it just to show the Death Eaters that I wasn’t more powerful than him. I couldn’t do anything; he had tied me to a gravestone. Then he gave me back my wand and we dueled.” All of the other students besides Ron and Hermione gasped. “First he told me to bow to death, to bow to him, but I wouldn’t do it. Somehow he made me bend in the middle anyway. And then before I could do anything else, he put the Cruciatu s Curse on me the second time. Then he wanted me to beg him not to do it again.”

“Did you?”

“No. So he tried to make me with the Imperious Curse.”

“Did it work?”

“I told him I wouldn’t do it.”

“And--”

“He tried to curse me again. But--I ran. I hid behind a gravestone.” Harry’s voice shook, telling about his cowardice.

“And then?”

“And then I stood to face him and I used the disarming charm at the same moment he used the killing curse. But somehow--the spells collided and canceled each other out. Then, something weird happened...he got distracted and I was able to get back to the cup--” and Cedric’s

body, he thought, but he didn't want to say it. "It was the portkey that had taken me there. It brought me back here to Hogwarts." Somehow, Harry had not wanted to tell about his wand and Voldemort's wand being brothers, about the dome of golden light and the sound of phoenix song, about the *Priori Incantem* and the shades of the people Voldemort had killed--including his parents and Cedric Diggory--interceding for him, making it possible for him to get away. All of the other students were silent with shock. "You were lucky," Moody told him, then turned to the rest of the class. "Odd as it sounds, when Voldemort feels he has a worthy opponent, he likes to give him a sporting chance. That said, I only know of two wizards who have dueled with Voldemort and lived to tell about it. Potter here is one. The other one you are accustomed to calling--Headmaster.

"Others have been less fortunate. Those who have been tortured by Death Eaters using the Cruciatus Curse, for instance. You see, the Death Eaters had orders, and they knew what would happen to them if they did not follow orders, if they did not succeed. In some ways, they were even more ruthless than Voldemort himself--HE didn't feel threatened by anyone. Each Death Eater has probably felt the Cruciatus Curse at least once in his life--because I know that Voldemort always wanted them to be mindful of what would happen to anyone who displeased him. Do a good job--and you would never have to experience it again. Slip up--and you took your chances. That's why the Death Eaters were--and are--so unrelentingly cruel. Self-preservation. THE EVIL INSIDE."

Lavender Brown timidly raised her hand and he nodded at her. "How is self-preservation evil?" "By itself, it's not evil. It's what people do to achieve it that often turns out to be evil. If they feel that anything is worth doing to achieve it. Anything..."

Neville was staring down at his desk with a strange expression on his face. Moody noticed and came over to him, leaning over slightly. "Have you been to see them lately, Longbottom?" he asked gently. Neville nodded, still not looking up. "I've been to see them myself from time to time. Do they recognize you?" Neville shook his head. "Ah, well. They were really put through the ringer--finest Aurors I ever knew, your parents."

The rest of the class, except for Harry, was looking at Neville in amazement. Neville looked up now and met Harry's gaze; Harry nodded grimly, to let Neville know he'd already known.

"Your parents had more pain coursing through them than I've ever heard tell. Of course it fried their brains. Because what you all may not know is that YOU CAN beat the Cruciatus Curse. It takes an even stronger mind than to fight the Imperious Curse, but the reason it can be beaten is that it's just pain. JUST PAIN. And pain is ALL IN YOUR MIND."

The fifth-year Gryffindors all had very perplexed looks on their faces. "Now," he went on, "that sounds like I think it's not real, I know. Let me explain." He stomped his wooden leg on the floor. "See this? I won't tell you how I lost my leg; you're not ready for that, trust me. Do you know why I regularly still experience pain in a leg I no longer have?"

Hermione looked around furtively before raising her hand slowly. "Phantom Limb Syndrome," she said shakily.

"Exactly!" Moody responded, making her give a quiet sigh of relief. "But what does that mean?"

Hermione took a breath and went on. "Your brain is still receiving signals from the leg--"

"Is the pain real? No! It's all in my head! Every time you bark your shin on a chair or put your hand in a flame, your body sends a message to your brain to feel pain. Interrupt the communication between the body and brain--no pain."

Hermione had apparently forgotten about being worried about being snapped at. “But pain serves a purpose--it protects us--”

“Yes, when it is a PHYSICAL pain, something you have come into contact with. But the Cruciatus Curse--” He looked at Neville. “--does not serve any purpose but to destroy the mind by overwhelming it with pain. Do it enough--and insanity is the result. Usually, it doesn’t happen that way, usually--the victims crumble and give in, agree to do just about anything. But sometimes, sometimes--” He walked over to Neville and clapped his hand on his shoulder. “--you find someone so principled that he or she is willing to endure the suffering rather than inflict it on someone else. That’s why the destruction of the mind of such a person is so tragic.”

Neville was crying now, tears running silently down his face. Moody took a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to him without comment. The rest of the class was quiet and shocked. “Now--you’re not ready yet to learn to disconnect your brain from your body in order to beat the Cruciatus Curse--but you will be, before you’re in sixth year. Unless--you just can’t do it. It’s not easy. Not everyone can do it. And although I want you to learn this, and we will work on it quite a lot this year, we won’t begin until after Christmas break.”

He walked back to his desk and leaned heavily on it, looking at each of them in turn with his normal eye. “Until then--we will analyze the nature of darkness. What makes a person turn dark? What makes another person decide not to? When is that crucial moment? Have you all got your copies of the Sweetbriar Publishing Anthology of Muggle Literature?”

Hermione and Harry nodded and leaned down to get the books from their bags; Neville and Seamus also had it. Ron raised his hand.

“Please--it was on the reading list for fifth years, but I thought it was only needed for Muggle Studies--”

“No. It’s for this class. Those who don’t have it had better write home for it. While you wait, there are copies in the school library you can borrow. Your assignment is to read one of the Shakespeare plays in the anthology--Lear, Hamlet, Othello or MacBeth (ignore the witch stereotypes)--and write me an essay--I won’t tell you how long. Make it as long as it needs to be--about a character or characters who succumb to the darkness, and why, and someone--could be more than one person--who doesn’t, and why. The essay is due in a month, and then you will each read your work to the class. On Wednesday you must each tell me what play you are doing. Also, read *The Lottery* and be prepared to discuss it. DON’T pick *The Tempest* for your Shakespeare--that’s more complex--you’ll all be reading that one and writing a long parchment about it at the end of term. DISMISSED!”

And he clumped out the door without looking at any of them. The fifth year Gryffindors all looked at each other. Harry checked his watch. “There’s still more than an hour left in the class...” he said lamely, as though it were his job as a prefect to point out something a teacher had done wrong. Hermione shrugged.

“Well, then we should go and start reading one of the plays, or at least decide which one to read. Let’s go back to the common room.”

But as it was the end of the day, and dinner wouldn’t be served for three more hours, the rest of the class had already decided that it was free time; they were going back to the common room too, but Seamus and Dean were discussing playing Exploding Snap, and Lavender and Parvati were planning to do Tarot readings for each other. Neville was very quiet, packing his bag and standing up slowly.

Harry remembered the way, a year earlier, Neville had clutched the desk spasmodically when

the fake Moody, who was really Barty Crouch, Jr., had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse on an enlarged spider. Hermione had screamed for Crouch to stop, seeing how distressed Neville was. Afterward, he had taken Neville up to his office for tea and given him a book. Harry wondered now whether Crouch was just trying to do a very convincing job of being Moody, or whether he was genuinely sorry for having effectively orphaned Neville, as much as Voldemort had orphaned Harry.

He also remembered being in Dumbledore's pensieve, seeing the trial of Barty Crouch, Jr. and the three other people who had tortured the Longbottoms; he remembered Crouch, a mere nineteen years old, screaming, "Father! I didn't do it!" as Barty Crouch, Sr. had his son sent away to Azkaban and Mrs. Crouch collapsed in grief. When he'd seen it, Harry had assumed that it was the elder Crouch who was in the wrong; now he knew that he had had the measure of his son, who was merely a very good actor. Well, they'd all seen during the previous year what a good actor he was.

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other and at Neville. Harry took a deep breath and spoke first. "I found out by accident, Neville. Dumbledore didn't want me to say anything; he said you'd say something when you were ready..."

"Moody shouldn't have done that, then," Hermione said indignantly. "It wasn't his place to--" "No," Neville said suddenly, sharply. He looked at the three of them with glistening eyes. "I'm glad everyone knows. I'm glad....excuse me. I have to go decide which play to read." He calmly picked up his bag and left. The three of them stood looking at each other awkwardly, then Ron said, "Why didn't you say anything, Harry?"

"You heard him," Hermione said. "Dumbledore didn't want him to."

"He can speak for himself, Hermione."

"Don't you snap at me, Ronald Weasley! You need to go to the library and find a copy of the Anthology of Muggle Literature!"

She shouldered her bag and left without looking at either of them. Ron looked at Harry, perplexed. "*Who's snapping?* I seem to be getting called *Ronald* a lot lately. First that scene after Potions, now this. What's her problem?"

Harry also stared after her, then turned back to Ron. "Oh, you know her. Probably still shell-shocked because Moody yelled at her."

Ron grimaced. "Yeah. She's so *perfect*..." he said in a mocking tone.

Harry felt like hitting him; it was a great effort not to. "I'm going to the common room. See you later."

"Okay. What play you going to read?"

"I don't know. Maybe Hamlet. That's supposed to be good, right?"

"I'm leaning toward Othello. He strangles his wife--I can identify, just now," he said, looking at the doorway where Hermione had disappeared. Harry shuddered. Hermione thought Ron was immature, Harry remembered, but it was possible that he was also just plain dangerous. Harry looked at his friend, wondering what was going through his mind.

"Well," he said finally, unable to comment on the wife-strangling statement. "See you."

* * * * *

While he was eating dinner, Alicia Spinnet tapped him on the shoulder and said, "When you're done, Professor McGonagall wants to see you." Harry looked up at the staff table. Professor McGonagall was drinking from her goblet and not looking at him. He glanced at Dumbledore, who met his eye and nodded with a slight smile at the corners of his mouth before putting his

fork into it. Harry took that as a good sign. Maybe they'll let me start next year after the O.W.L.s, he thought. Or maybe they'll make it contingent on the O.W.L.s, in which case I had *really* better work hard to get good marks...

When he was done, he stood, explained to Ron and Hermione that he had to see McGonagall, and walked toward the staff table without letting Hermione finish asking why. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall had risen and were heading toward the anteroom where he'd attended the prefects' meeting the previous evening, the same anteroom where he had gone to wait with the other champions after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire.

He closed the door after himself and walked over to the large fireplace where Dumbledore and McGonagall were standing, waiting for him. Their faces were in shadow with the fire behind them, but what expressions Harry could see looked very serious. Dumbledore spoke first.

"Somewhat against Professor McGonagall's better judgment, I have recommended that not only should you receive Animagus training from her, but that it should commence immediately. You have a mortal enemy who is targeting your friends and their families, and trying to build his power and his supporters in the wizarding world. You have a number of excellent skills, and a strong mind Harry, and I feel that adding this skill to your arsenal will make you even more of a formidable opponent for Voldemort."

McGonagall looked at him evenly. "It will not be easy, Potter. It may even not be possible for you. But we need to know that sooner than later."

"I know it can take a while--it took my dad three years--"

She brushed this off. "That is because he was not properly supervised. If you have the aptitude for it, you could do it in six months."

"Six months!" Harry was floored; he had not expected that.

"Or less. A year at most. If you are suited to it. We will begin immediately."

"I know. The headmaster said--"

"No. You don't understand," Dumbledore said to him. "Right this minute."

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them. "Right now?"

McGonagall stepped forward. "First, tell me, Potter, have you ever done magic without a wand?"

"Without a wand? Of course not."

"Think, Potter. There's a kind of magic you do without a wand every time you play Quidditch..."

"You mean flying a broomstick?"

"Do you think a Muggle can fly a Firebolt? There's no magic in the person for it to respond to."

"I'd never thought about it..."

"Can you think about any other times you've done magic without a wand?"

"Well--does speaking to snakes count?"

She considered this. "That's more like an innate ability that you have no control over. Think of when you were younger, before you knew you were a wizard."

Having just thought of talking to snakes, Harry's mind immediately went to the time he had inadvertently released the boa constrictor he'd been talking to in the zoo; he had somehow made the glass disappear that was holding the snake prisoner. He told them about this.

"That's closer, Potter, but let me ask you this: have you ever altered your body magically in any way, without using potions, magical plants or a wand? Just your will?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair, thinking, then did it again and stopped with his hand half-

way through and pulled his hand out of his hair and stared at it. “Yes,” he realized. “You wouldn’t know it now,” he said, “but when I was younger I hated to get my hair cut. Every time my aunt and uncle cut my hair, I was so angry, I just spent the night in my cupboard under the stairs seething--and when I got up in the morning, it was always just the same as it had been, as though it had never been cut.”

Dumbledore and McGonagall smiled and nodded. “Excellent!” she said. “That’s the kind of thing I’m looking for, that indicates that you might have a knack for this. It takes a special kind of concentration and control over and awareness of one’s body to accomplish the Animagus transformation.”

“Do you need me for anything else, Minerva?” Dumbledore asked her.

“No, Headmaster.”

“Then I have some letters to write. Good night. Good luck, Harry!”

“Thank you, Professor,” he said a little nervously. Dumbledore made long strides across the room and left.

Harry turned back to Professor McGonagall. “So because I didn’t like haircuts I might be able to become an Animagus?”

“It’s not as simple as it sounds, Potter,” she said, and then without warning, she disappeared and in her stead was a dignified, aloof-looking cat with marks around its eyes that looked rather like Professor McGonagall’s square-shaped eyeglasses. It seemed that Harry blinked, and she was human again. “An Animagus can change back and forth in a second--in less than a second. Let’s practice something. You’ll do this repeatedly until you have complete control, and then we’ll move on to something else. First, hold up your hands in front of your eyes, palms out, like this.” Harry imitated her. “Look at your fingernails,” she instructed him. “Stare at them, notice how each one looks, think about how they feel going into your skin. Look at them for as long as it takes to become an expert on them.”

Harry stared at his fingernails, wondering vaguely what this had to do with becoming an Animagus. He didn’t speak. This went on for ten minutes.

“Now,” McGonagall said at last, “close your eyes. Can you still picture them?”

“Yes.”

“Keep your eyes closed. Think about your fingernails the way they are now. Now think about what they would look if they were longer, and then want them to be longer, will them to grow...”

Harry thought about having longer fingernails, wondering if perhaps they should have measured them first, so they’d be able to tell whether there was a difference of any kind; suddenly, he felt a pain in his fingers and a sensation of the bones in his hands becoming liquid...

“Aaaah!” he screamed in alarm. He looked at his hands; the last joint on each finger was elongating slowly, so that his fingers were now an inch longer each, now two inches, now three...while his fingernails at the end of the stretched fingers looked exactly the same.

“*Finite Incantatem!*” McGonagall said quickly, tapping Harry’s hands with her wand. His hands stopped growing and then shrank back to normal.

“Concentrate, Potter, concentrate. You need to focus more. Spend more time contemplating your fingernails.” Harry could think of plenty of times when teachers had told students--not usually him, true--to *stop* contemplating their fingernails, but this was the first time he’d ever heard a teacher tell a student to do *more* of it.

He did as she said, losing track of time; he forgot to blink for a time, and then was forced to do

quite a lot of blinking; then when it seemed he'd been holding his hands in front of him and staring at them forever, he decided to close his eyes and think *grow*.

He didn't feel anything. Then he opened his eyes and looked into the smiling face of Professor McGonagall, who was looking at his now eight-inch long fingernails. He felt like laughing, but her face became serious again.

"Now, Potter," she said, "make them normal again."

He looked up at her and suddenly panicked. Uh, oh, he thought. I knew there was a catch. But he held up his hands before his eyes again and contemplated his fingernails once more. He felt like he was getting double vision by the time he closed his eyes and thought about his nails being normal. When he opened his eyes again--his hands looked as they had when he had entered the room.

"Excellent, Potter!" McGonagall praised him, something rare for her. "That's enough for tonight, I think. We'll practice that every night after dinner, in here, until you build up your speed. You should go back up to Gryffindor Tower now. I have a meeting. Good night!"

Suddenly, he heard Sandy hissing under his robes, saying, "A cat will meet with a beetle."

Harry stopped and turned, "Professor," he said, "by the way, speaking of Animagi and all--what exactly is Rita Skeeter doing these days?"

McGonagall looked shaken, as though he had read her mind about what she was about to do.

"Why--I can't discuss that with you, Potter. The fewer people who know about that, the better."

He'd thought he'd gotten one over on her. Oh well... "Good night, Professor."

"Good night. Oh, and Potter? Have you given any thought to what animal you'll be choosing? You'll need to do a great deal of research on your animal of choice, learn everything you possibly can about it."

"Er, no. I'll start thinking about it. Good night."

He passed out into the Great Hall again, checking his watch--he'd been contemplating his fingernails for an hour-and-a-half, apparently--and went back up to the Gryffindor common room. As he entered, Colin Creevey put a camera in his face and took his picture with a blinding flash. Harry threw up his hand before his face, too late, groaning, "Colin--" Great, he thought. Colin was doing the whole Harry Potter Fan Club thing again.

"He's been taking pictures constantly," Lee Jordan explained from one of the tables; he was writing out pithy comments for the first Quidditch match.

"I've got a penfriend at a wizarding school in America, and I'm sending him pictures of all my house mates. But I'm also giving copies to whoever wants them. I got a good one of George and Angelina I'm giving them."

Ron and Seamus and Dean were ignoring Colin when he took their picture, sitting at a table with copies of the Anthology of Muggle Literature open before them, but they were actually playing Exploding Snap. At another table, some first years were being told horror stories by some second years about the castle ghosts. Hermione and Parvati and Lavender were sitting by the fire discussing the witches in MacBeth, and Ginny was sitting cross-legged in a corner reading a potions text. In another corner, George sat in an armchair talking to Fred, who was on the floor, while Angelina sat draped across George's lap also casually talking to Fred. They seemed so natural and easy with each other, Harry thought. They made a good couple. When Colin took their picture again, they ignored him.

Harry sat on the floor next to Ginny, looking around the room, feeling pleased with himself, then

wondering what animal he would become. A stag like his father? No, that wasn't right somehow. Think, think...

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Ginny's voice came suddenly. He jerked his head up, having forgotten about her.

"Oh, something for Transfiguration..." he said lamely, but truthfully. "What animals do you like? If you could--become one--what would you choose?"

"You mean like an Animagus? Oh, I don't know--" her face lit up suddenly. "There are so many good ones. A bird, maybe, like a hawk or an eagle. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to fly like that? Or perhaps a horse; running with four legs looks so wonderful. Why, what would you choose?"

Then he looked up and the first thing that met his eye was the lion above the fireplace opening, on the keystone. "What about a lion?" he said, turning to look at her.

She regarded him shrewdly. "You mean like the Gryffindor lion? With a mane and everything? That'd be really beautiful..." she trailed off, looking at him. Their eyes were locked somehow. Suddenly a bright flash went off out of the corner of Harry's eye, and he realized Colin had taken their picture. He turned away from Ginny and rose.

"Well," he said abruptly. "Gotta study. Bye," he said heading for the stairs. On the way, he noticed Hermione looking at him oddly. When he reached the fifth-year dorm room, only Neville was there.

"Oh," he said stiffly, "Hello, Harry."

"What are you reading, Neville?"

"King Lear."

Harry nodded, not wanting to have a more protracted conversation with Neville at this point. He sat down and got out some parchment and a quill and ink, writing down, *Hawk, Eagle, Horse, Lion*. He looked at the list. Surely he could think of more possibilities than that. He pictured Ginny's face when she'd talked about flying--but then, he kept coming back to the lion...

He lay back on the covers, trying to picture his father as a stag, and him running beside him as a lion...but a lion would hunt down and kill a stag...He shook his head. No; as far as he knew, he'd still be intelligent enough to be able to control his animal instincts and avoid hunting like a real lion, or hawk, or eagle...The horse was the only animal on his list that was more prey than predator, he realized. He needed to consider this choice very carefully. He changed for bed and closed his curtains, lying back in the darkness, picturing his fingernails...

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Chapter Eight **Divination with Sandy**

The next morning after breakfast, the fifth-year Gryffindors headed down to Hagrid's cabin for their first Care of Magical Creatures class. It turned out to be somewhat tamer than they had come to expect however; Hagrid had built what looked like a chicken yard, but pecking around it was a flock of geese. Hermione asked him what the geese were for.

"Ah," said Hagrid. "Each o' yer is goin' ter have yer own goose ter take care o', see, and we'll see who gets the Goose what Lays the Golden Egg." Harry had to admit that it certainly seemed safer than Blast-Ended Skrewts, but somewhat boring as well. Then Draco Malfoy

pointed to the fenced-in paddock beside the lake.

“What’re those for?” he wanted to know. In the paddock were a dozen beautiful golden bulls, the biggest bulls they’d ever seen. Their horns looked made of gold too, and they pawed the ground and snorted between pausing to eat grass.

Hagrid smiled. “Sun bulls. Now, now, I know yer want to be challenged, but those’re for the seventh years. Part o’ their takin’ the N.E.W.T.s. If I got them all worked up by the likes of *you*, I’d be in a heap o’ trouble.”

“Sun bulls?” said Hermione. “What do they have to do with them?”

“They have to harness ‘em and plow a field with ‘em. Without getting hurt.”

“But how?” Ron wanted to know; Harry thought he was probably considering whether Fred and George might be in quite a bit of danger. The Triwizard Tournament seemed safer.

“Now, now; each boy will have a girl for a partner. They’re supposed to figure it out together. Don’t worry about it; you lot have yer O.W.L.s ter worry about, so I didn’t want to make life too difficult fer yeh.”

They spent the rest of their class time choosing and feeding the goose of their choice. Lavender Brown and Crabbe were each nipped by theirs; Malfoy laughed at them both until his goose came running at him with her wings flapping, making a strange crying sound, and he went scrambling over the fence out of harm’s way. The entire class laughed at this, even the other Slytherins, and Malfoy went off in high dudgeon. Hagrid didn’t stop him. Then Harry heard Pansy Parkinson saying to Goyle, “Serves him right, too. Bigheaded prefect...I am so over him...”

It seemed that even the other Slytherins couldn’t stand Malfoy these days, Harry thought. That explained why he hadn’t seen him around Crabbe and Goyle much. Malfoy seemed to be taking a page from Percy Weasley’s book of how to be the world’s most obnoxious prefect.

After Care of Magic Creatures, they headed for the greenhouses for Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. Professor Sprout was waiting for them outside one of the greenhouses with trowels and burlap bags, telling them to put on their dragon-hide gloves and weed the vegetable beds. They looked at each other uncertainly. Some professors had clearly decided to pile on work for the fifth-years; others had decided to take it easy on them. Oh well, it kind of balanced out, Harry thought.

The students all removed their robes and rolled up their sleeves--those that had sleeves to roll up, which Harry did not. A couple of Hufflepuff girls who hadn’t seen Sandy before screamed when she was revealed wrapped around Harry’s bare arm, but he encouraged them to come over and stroke her, and once they had done that, they started in with a load of questions that Harry was unprepared for (not to mention, some of their hands were straying off onto his arm when they were supposed to be stroking the snake). Professor Sprout ordered them to get back to work, and Harry knelt down in the dirt, pulling weeds, feeling quite at home after the summer, getting the same satisfaction out of it he’d had at home (although many of the weeds here were far worse than dandelions--hence the dragon-hide gloves).

When they were walking up to the castle for lunch, Hermione had a distant look on her face, and Ron asked her what she was thinking. She looked startled and then said, “Oh, I was just thinking back to the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg. I was trying to remember where it came from, some fairy-tale or other...”

“It’s not from a fairy-tale; it’s real. You saw them,” said Ron.

“You know what I mean. All those fairy-tales were written by Muggles who still had some

contact with the world of magic, before the wizarding world started getting so insular and protective of itself. I mean, when I was little and my parents would read to me about ogres and trolls and giants and elves and leprechauns and witches and wizards, they always assured me that of course it was made up. But it wasn't; it turns out I'm a witch, and I've since seen most of those creatures and more. I know that the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg is real; I also think it would be helpful to find which fairy-tale it appeared in. After I eat I'm--"

"Going to the library," Harry and Ron intoned in unison, then laughed. Hermione pouted at first, then laughed with them. She linked her right arm through Ron's left, and her left arm through Harry's right.

"You two know me too well," she smiled, and they went off to lunch in high spirits, arm in arm. It had been a good morning. When they reached the entrance hall, Colin Creevey took their picture as he was getting ready to go into the Great Hall. That'll be a good one, thought Harry. Must remember to ask for a copy.

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The day went rapidly downhill after lunch, when they had History of Magic with their only ghost teacher, Professor Binns. Usually attentive in this class (being the only student Harry had ever known who had memorized *Hogwarts: A History*) Harry was shocked to realize that Hermione had chosen to sit in the back row so she could leaf through a book of fairy-tales she'd borrowed from the library. He scribbled a note on a corner of parchment. *Find anything?* it said.

She shook her head and mouthed the words *Not yet*.

She kept her head buried in the library book all during the class. By the end, practically everyone was virtually comatose. Harry stared stupidly out the window; Seamus had his head down on his desk and was audibly snoring; Ron was reading Othello and making notes; Dean and Lavender and Parvati looked listless and limp. Neville was still taking notes, but more and more slowly, as though he were a clock that needed to be wound.

They all dragged themselves out the door afterward and headed off for Divination, except for Hermione, who had Arithmancy. Harry and Ron trudged up to Professor Trelawney's tower, then climbed up the silver rope ladder to the hot, dark, airless circular room where she liked to predict Harry's death in a variety of creative ways.

Today, she paired them up to do Tarot card readings. Harry was stuck with Parvati; Ron was with Neville. Professor Trelawney paired with Lavender, while Dean and Seamus were put together. Harry was supposed to do a reading for Parvati first.

"Now," she said in a bossy tone, "I was born under Pisces with Venus rising, understand? Now start."

One by one, Harry laid out cards and Parvati corrected the way he positioned them or his interpretation of them.

"No, no, that's not the Death Card," she said when he'd held up the Prince of Cups and talked about someone close to her dying. This was harder than making up star charts, he thought. And Sandy was being no help. Except that suddenly, she was; he heard her hiss, "A fish will burn."

"A fish will burn?" Harry repeated in English. Parvati stared at him.

"Why are you saying that? Where in the cards does it say that?" She stood and looked down at the array of cards on the table. It was almost a full minute before either Harry or Parvati noticed that she'd put her sleeve in the candle, and her robes were smoldering, then a flame rose up and started licking the rest of her robes. "I'm on fire!" she screamed.

Harry pulled out his wand, pointing it at her and shouting, "*Pluvius!*" But as soon as he said it, Harry realized it should have been an *F, Fluvius*, so a stream of water would come out of his wand, not *Pluvius*, for rain; the entire ceiling of the divination classroom was now raining on everyone. They were all soaked in seconds, and the soggy cards were being blown off the tables by unseen winds. All of the candles had been extinguished by the wind and water and it was very dim. The water was icy cold.

"*Dessicatio!*" Neville shouted, pointing his wand at the ceiling. The rain stopped, and all of the water in the room seemed to have instantly dried up.

Professor Trelawney was brushing down her robes, glaring at Harry, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Longbottom," without actually looking at Neville. Harry looked with respect at him; he was having a good start to the year, thought Harry. Moody and Trelawney liked him, and Professor Sprout always gave him full marks. Even Snape hadn't been too hard on him in Potions the previous day. He'd grown taller and was less round than he used to be, and his voice had deepened as well. Harry thought it was even possible he was growing a pale mustache--but perhaps it was too soon to tell.

"So!" Professor Trelawney said. "If Mr. Potter is done dousing us all--"

"But Professor!" Parvati cried excitedly. "He predicted it. I looked--it wasn't in the cards. He just--said it. Like a question."

"Really?" Professor Trelawney looked interested. "What did he say?" *He*, thought Harry. He was getting tired of being discussed as though he weren't in the room.

"He said, 'A fish will burn?' Like he didn't know what it meant. And I'm Pisces with Venus rising, and--"

"The Sight." Trelawney came over to peer closely at Harry.

"Well, I don't know--it just occurred to me to say it," Harry said weakly. The other students were staring at him. Then he heard Sandy say, "Don't light the black candle." Harry suddenly scrambled for some parchment and a quill and wrote this down. Then he folded the parchment in half twice. Professor Trelawney looked excited.

"What are you doing?" she wanted to know. Harry shook his head, handing her the parchment.

"Don't look at that for a few minutes," he told her. She looked perplexed.

"Very well. Mr. Finnigan, could you please get the lights?" One by one, Seamus pointed his wand at the red candles that they had been working by, and the flames sprung into life once more. Then he pointed at a black candle on a shelf and lit that one before Professor Trelawney noticed. She had been waving her wand at the spilled cards, making them leap back up onto the tables. However, as soon as the black candle was lit, a cold wind seemed to whip through the room, scattering the cards again and making them all shiver as though they had just drunk ice water. Trelawney whirled around, her teeth chattering, as she saw the flame sputtering on the black candle. Pointing her wand at it, she extinguished it.

"Don't you know," she said to Seamus, quite irritated, "that you *never* light a black candle without lighting a white candle first, to balance it?" She pointed her wand at a white candle on the mantle, which sprung to life, and the chill air seemed to be sucked out of the room, and Harry felt like there'd been a dementor there who'd left, and almost started to feel like someone had put a cheering charm on him. Professor Trelawney extinguished the white candle. "That's quite enough," she said. "Any more euphoria and you won't be able to concentrate. Back to work!" And now she took out the slip of parchment Harry had handed her, he saw her lips moving, reading the words but making no sound, and suddenly, she sat in the chair Parvati was

about to use and told her brusquely, "I'll partner with Mr. Potter. You go with Miss Brown." Ron looked at Harry quizzically; Parvati looked miffed.

Professor Trelawney swept the cards back onto the table with a swish of her wand, and had Harry cut the pack. "Your birthday?" she asked. Harry couldn't believe how she kept forgetting; once she had insisted that he had been born during the winter. The other partners were dealing out cards and beginning their readings, oblivious to Harry and the professor. "July thirty-first," he replied. She started placing the cards on the table before her, nodding and gasping as she saw various messages in their arrangement.

"You had a mortal enemy," she told him, as she had many times before. Harry groaned inwardly--everyone knew that. Then he realized that she said had. "He no longer wishes to be your enemy," she said, tapping a card with a snake on it. "This is you," she said, tapping a card with a winged lion. "He has seen your power and--he wishes to recruit you." Harry looked up, his eyes wide. "But he has withdrawn from you--he will send his servants to you instead." She turned over a card. "A man who betrayed your family." Wormtail, he thought. She turned over another card. "A man whose son is also your enemy." Malfoy? Crabbe? Goyle? All possibilities. "But the son--" she tapped a card with a dragon on it "--may not be your enemy for much longer." *That* was surprising, thought Harry. "And--" she paused after turning over another card. "--your mortal enemy's heir." *heir?* Voldemort had an *heir?* The card depicted some sort of raptor, a huge bird of prey.

She turned over more cards. "There are three women in your life." Harry thought of all the girls who'd been making him feel like an animal in the zoo. Only three? "One is an older woman, but there is much guilt in that...you once desired her, but you are no longer interested." Well, that was true of Cho, he thought. "Two others: She--" Trelawney tapped a card with a picture of the winged messenger of the gods on it. "--is torn between you and--" Flip! went the card. "--your brother." I don't have a brother, Harry thought irritably. This is a *such* a load of dung. "--who will turn on you for taking her from him. But she--" Trelawney held up the lovers card. "--she is your true love, a warrior woman, your soul mate--although you must wait for her...she will be with another for a while, but remain pure, waiting for you. Only together can you defeat your mortal enemy."

Did that mean Voldemort? He could be defeated? *That* was good news. Harry stared at the cards before him, trying to remember everything she'd said. "Is that all?" he asked anxiously, forgetting that he'd thought it was ridiculous a moment before.

"Well, there are other connections. See, the woman you lust after--" Harry was jolted as she tapped the messenger card again. "--is linked with the heir of your foe. She is being held prisoner by him." What? Harry thought. I don't know anyone being held prisoner...and as for lust... "And the older woman is connected to your enemy's servant--" she pointed to the card that was not Wormtail. Was that Malfoy's dad? he wondered again. What could Cho have to do with him? Then she pointed out that the card that was the son (the one with the dragon on it), the one who would not be his enemy for long, was connected to the lovers card. "Your true love will be torn--but when she finally comes to you, he will turn on you--and yet, he will also be needed to help you defeat your foe."

She stopped and Harry felt his head swimming. Too much information, too many people to keep track of... "And now, the last two cards." She put another card on what he thought of as Wormtail's card (he now noticed that it in fact depicted a large rat). "Another brother," she said. How many brothers am I supposed to have? Harry wondered. "And for him, at the hand

of the traitor..." and she turned over the last card. It was the Spectre of Death.

"Death?" Harry whispered, then tried to remind himself that he didn't have one brother, let alone two.

"Not necessarily. This--" she tapped the deadly-looking card, "--can just mean a change, a transition." She opened her eyes wider. "Ah--" she said, "and your mortal enemy will tempt you with your most deeply-held desire--it is a fourth woman--you love each other--"

But she's not my true love? Harry thought. Then how can she be my most deeply-held desire? And what about the one I'm lusting after?

"You will be confronted with a choice. And if you do not choose wisely--" suddenly, her voice caught as she gazed at the cards. "The world as we know it will end," she said softly.

Harry looked up at her enormous eyes behind her glasses. "What?" he heard himself saying, as though it were somebody else. "I have to make a choice that could end the world as we know it?" He stood up, running his hands through his hair. He pointed down at the cards. "This is ridiculous. I don't have any brothers. You tell me I have both a true love and another woman is my most deeply-held desire--make up your mind! And nothing I decide could end the world as we know it. Nothing!" He suddenly swept the cards off the table with his arm, then stood again, panting, looking at her defiantly. He was a prefect; he wasn't supposed to be speaking to teachers this way. Well, at this rate, he wouldn't be a prefect much longer...

The whole class was watching. Trelawney calmly magicked the cards back into a neat stack on the table with a sweep of her wand. "You may go. This has been a stressful class for you. But I forgive your outburst, because you have the Sight..." she said placidly.

Harry turned to go, shouldering his bag, but before his head disappeared from sight down the ladder, he said loudly and firmly, "*I do not have the Sight!*" Then, he heard Sandy say, "A flame-haired man will fall off a ladder..." He thought of going back and warning Ron, but inasmuch as he'd just denied having the Sight, he thought better of it and just kept going.

He walked down the many stairs and then through winding passages to Gryffindor Tower. He entered the common room, passed through it without seeing it, and went up to the dorm. He was done for the day, thank god. It was still hot, so he opened a window and took off his shirt, lounging on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. Then he felt like he wanted some sound other than the rushing in his ears, the sound of Trelawney's voice saying *The world as we know it will end*. He took his portable tape player out of his trunk and put on the headphones, made sure the tape was rewound, and pressed play. He could see the parts that moved the tape going round and round; he could hear a kind of hissing noise (but not Parseltongue), but no music. He pressed the stop button. Oh, well. Hermione was always telling him that there was too much magical interference around Hogwarts for these kinds of things to work. Magnetic tape, he realized. And batteries: more magnetism. He knew that magic and magnets did not mix well. He put the tape player away and leaned back again with his hands behind his head, then looked down and watched the basilisk amulet rising and falling on his bare chest.

Why me? he thought. Why is it always me? Because deep inside, he knew that he really did believe that he could be in a position to make a choice that could change the world. Was the choice to join Voldemort or to fight him? He heard Moody's voice in his head now: *What makes a person turn dark? What makes another person decide not to? When is that crucial moment? When indeed?* But, Harry thought, *he* would never do that. Voldemort wanted to recruit him now, did he? He'd heard about Voldemort and the other Death Eaters torturing people's family members to coerce them to be Death Eaters also. Is that what he was

after, coming after Ron and Hermione? Forcing me to become a Death Eater? Harry Potter, Death Eater. It was too preposterous...Unless, Harry thought, the choice *not* to be one is what would end the world as we know it...He closed his eyes and tried to imagine that his tape player worked, tried to block the Tarot card reading out of his brain before it drove him crazy.

* * * * *

He must have dozed off from the heat of the late summer afternoon. When he woke, Hermione was sitting on the bed next to him, shaking him. She was carrying her robes; she was obviously hot too, her short curls were clustered around a face that looked damp and humid; her blouse had damp wet spots under the arms and she wiped some perspiration off her forehead and spoke in a tired voice. "Come on, Harry. We have to go to the hospital wing." She stood to go and he saw that there was also a damp spot on her blouse in the small of her back. "I'm just going to change my clothes first. Why do they have to make these robes so hot and heavy?" she said wearily, heading for the door.

"Is Ron all right?"

She turned at the doorway. "Yeah. He broke his leg, but Seamus, Dean and Neville got him to the hospital wing okay, and Madam Pomfrey should have him mended by the time we get there. You should know; you've broken your leg before." Then she looked like she woke up.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"How--how did you know?"

Harry still felt like he was asleep. He pulled himself up and swung his legs over the side of the bed while saying, "Well, he fell off the ladder leaving Trelawney's, didn't he?"

She still stared at him. "Yes," she said slowly. "But you weren't there."

Now Harry felt as though he'd thoroughly woken up, too. "Oh, um, but I had trouble with the ladder when I was leaving. I figured that thing was just an accident waiting to happen..."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "But how did you know the one who fell was Ron?"

He shrugged. "You wouldn't be here to take me to the hospital wing if it were Seamus, Dean or Neville, or Lavender or Parvati, either. Well, you might if it were Neville. But then Ron would have come to get me himself, probably." He looked at her levelly, daring her to refute his logic. She looked dissatisfied by this explanation, still, but also looked like she'd decided she was fighting a losing battle.

"I know it's hot," she said, "but you'd better put on a shirt. Not that any of the female students would mind if you walked around like that..." She smiled at him, looking a little as she had on Sunday night, when she stroked his jaw as they stood outside the common room. She turned and left without another word.

Harry put on a clean shirt and pinned his prefect badge to it and left Sandy curled up on his bed--it was plenty hot, she didn't need to be on his arm--and went down to the common room where Hermione was waiting. She had also pinned her prefect badge to her clean blouse. They walked through the corridors to the hospital wing without speaking; once, while they were swinging their arms, their hands collided, giving Harry a shock, and he thought about reaching out to take her hand, but then changed his mind. He increased his stride instead, and Hermione increased her speed to keep up with him.

"Harry," she complained, "it's too hot to run." She jogged for a few seconds to catch up to him, then reached out and grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers through his. He let her, remembering how they had held hands when she'd told him about the abduction. It seemed like another lifetime that they were there in the Dursley's garden, lying on the grass and talking. He

slowed down and they walked together, their hands linked, up to the infirmary. Harry opened the door with his left hand and they entered still holding hands.

Ron was lying back on a bed, propped up by many pillows but with his eyes closed. His left leg was covered with bandages that were protecting the magical poultices that were healing his broken bone. Harry remembered that Dick had also broken his left leg when he had ignored Sandy's warning about the rocks falling. Harry had wished that he had access to magical medicine to help Dick. Now Ron had a broken leg because Harry had ignored Sandy again. Ron opened his eyes and started to smile until he saw their linked hands.

"I found Harry taking a nap in the dorm," Hermione told him.

"You two took a while," he said flatly. "And you changed your clothes."

Hermione pulled her hand out of Harry's and went to stand on the opposite side of the bed from Harry. "It's hot, we were all sweaty..." she began, then stopped. *That* didn't sound good, Harry realized.

"Anyway." Harry tried to sound brisk. "I'm sorry about all this."

"All what? I was a great prat and fell and broke my leg. What are you sorry about?"

"Um, er, well..."

"Tell him, Harry," Hermione said sternly. Harry looked at her.

"Tell him what?"

"All right, I will. Harry knew you were going to fall, Ron."

"Hermione--"

"What?" Ron said, incredulous. "You knew, and didn't tell me? Wait--how did you know? Oh, god, is that why you were screaming *I don't have the Sight* when you were leaving?"

"No, I was saying that because *I don't have the Sight*!" Harry said irritably. "Hermione, stop doing this..."

"You knew," Hermione said. "I'm sure of it. I don't know how you knew, but you knew..."

"You should have heard him before Trelawney dismissed him," Ron told her. "He was all, *I don't have any brothers. How can I have a true love and a woman who is my deepest desire! And how can I end the world as we know it? Or something like that.*"

"What were you doing?"

"Tarot readings. I'll have to tell you two about mine later; Neville was too funny..."

She looked at Harry again now. "What did Trelawney say to you?"

Harry grimaced. "Oh, come on, Hermione, you know her. It's all bunk. That's why you left Divination..."

"*What did she say?*"

He sighed. "She said that I had a mortal enemy who no longer wants to be my enemy."

She looked puzzled. "Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's great. See, he no longer wants to be my enemy because he's decided I'm a pretty powerful wizard, so he wants to recruit me instead."

Ron and Hermione stared at him. "What?" they both said at once.

"Yeah, so I figured, a Death Eater tattoo would look pretty cool with all of my new robes, and I could maybe get an earring like that too, perhaps grow a ponytail like Bill..."

"Harry, stop! You would never do that!" Hermione said, exasperated.

"Why not? Because I want everyone who's close to me to be tortured and murdered while I make up my mind?" He looked at the two of them grimly. "She said he has withdrawn from me and is sending his servants. You remember what Moody said about the Death Eaters, don't

you? About how they're afraid of the Cruciatus Curse, so they can be even more ruthless than Voldemort himself? Do you think I want you two being tortured?"

"But Harry, if you were--hypothetically--to become a Death Eater, what if you were told to torture people? If you didn't do it, *you'd* be tortured instead..."

"I don't care about that. That's just my own pain; I've coped with it before. I can do it again."

"But you see, Harry," she said pleadingly, tears starting to form in her eyes, "that's why you can't be a Death Eater. Because you'd rather suffer yourself than see anyone else suffer. You're just not cut out for it."

"She said I have to make a choice," he said softly, looking at his hands. "I have to choose wisely, or the world as we know it will end..."

She went round the bed and put her hands on his. "You will make the right choice, Harry, you will. But you're not going to become a Death Eater to protect us. I'd rather die first than have that happen."

Ron looked at him earnestly. "Me too."

He looked back and forth between them. "Problem is, I'd rather be a Death Eater if it meant that you two didn't have to be tortured or die, so I guess we're just not going to agree about this."

They looked blankly at him. He turned and strode toward the door of the infirmary, but as he opened the door, he heard Hermione's light steps behind him. He didn't look back. When he tried to close the door, she was there, slipping through. She closed the door and then turned and threw her arms around his waist; he didn't hesitate before putting his arms around her, pillowing his cheek on the top of her head, feeling the tears escaping from his eyes into her hair. He felt his shirt grow wet from her tears. It felt like they stood there what way for a long time, and then finally she separated herself from him, stood on her toes to kiss his cheek, and went running off, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands.

* * * * *

"Okay, now Fred and George are getting some food from the kitchens, and Parvati and Lavender are asking Hannah if we can borrow her Wizarding Wireless for music, and--what about something like balloons? Or streamers?" Ginny was ticking off a list as Harry entered the common room. Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked her. "And have you even been to see your brother, who's lying in the hospital wing with a broken leg?"

She frowned at him. "What do you take me for? Of course I have. And Fred and George are there with him now. Do you want to handle decorations?"

"Decorations? For what? And I asked you where Hermione is."

"Neville asked her for help with his Transfiguration homework. They went to the library. He's the diversion. Do you think I'd plan Hermione's surprise party with her sitting right here? I mean, she's had a rough summer, and I thought--"

"Surprise party?"

"Harry, her birthday is on Saturday. Did you forget?" Frankly, he *had* forgotten that her birthday was September ninth. "So, can you handle decorations?"

"Yeah, sure, sure," he said distractedly, walking toward the stairs to the boys' dorms.

"Harry!"

"What?" he said distractedly, turning.

"I thought you were looking for Hermione."

“Oh, well--it sounds like she’s busy helping Neville. It can wait.”

She looked at him with concern. “Are you all right, Harry?”

No, I’m not all right, he thought. I just found out that I’m being recruited to be a Death Eater, and you could be targeted, and Hermione, and Ron, and your other brothers, and your parents, and all of my teachers...

“I’m okay,” he croaked; his throat felt very dry suddenly. It was somehow painful to look at her, so he went up the stairs to his dorm and lay down on the bed, closing the curtains, despite the heat. He desperately had wanted to talk to her, or to Hermione, someone, but everyone was so busy, too busy to be concerned about whether Voldemort had another Death Eater or not.

He picked up Sandy from the bed and hissed at her, “What should I do, Sandy?”

“Do, Harry Potter?”

“I don’t want to be a dark wizard. But I don’t want to put my friends in danger.”

“Then don’t look for it. It will come to you.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. If only I had some way to go after the Death Eaters myself; then if Voldemort didn’t have any more servants, he’d have to deal with me directly...”

“Then do that.”

“It’s not that simple!” She was being frustrating again, making her facile statements, giving advice as though she knew anything at all about it...

I’m really cracking up now, he thought. I’m getting ready to lash out at a garden snake for not understanding my ridiculously complicated life. He remembered holding Hermione, and all he could think was that he wanted to hold her again, wanted to just hold her and forget about the rest of the world....

* * * * *

Harry pushed the Tarot reading out of his mind. On Saturday after dinner, Harry and Ron were supposed to convince Hermione to take a detour to the library so Ginny and the other Gryffindors had a chance to get the common room ready for the party. When the time for the party came, they both claimed to have all of the research they needed for their History of Magic homework, and dragged her back up to the common room, confused, because they’d actually stopped in the middle of the assignment. A week later, the password to the common room had been changed.

“Yorkshire pudding,” Hermione said to the fat lady.

“Sounds scrumptious!” came the reply before the portrait swung open, followed by all of the Gryffindors, including Professor McGonagall, crying, “Surprise!”

Hermione looked like she was going to faint. Ron and Harry had to help her through the portrait hole, and then she had to hug Ginny, and Parvati, and Lavender, and everyone, until she came back round to Ron and Harry again, and hugged both of them at once. Then someone turned on the wireless for music, and started passing around butterbeer and plates of cake. Everyone seemed to be laughing and talking at once. Harry watched her face; she was totally floored, had not suspected a thing. He came up behind Ginny, putting his arm around her shoulder and whispering to her, “Good job, Gin.” She looked at him and smiled. Why was it so hard to look away from Ginny these days?

She leaned close to him and asked, “What did you get her?”

He’d almost forgotten. “Oh! I have to go get it!” He went dashing up the stairs; in a minute, he was back with a wrapped package. He pulled Ron away from the punch and over to where

Hermione was sitting by the fire. He presented it to her, saying, "Happy Birthday, Hermione. It's from both of us."

She grinned, ripping the paper apart with abandon, then opened her mouth in surprise. "Oh--it's wonderful! Everybody, look--" and she turned a picture frame around so that everyone could see the moving photograph of the three of them, walking with their arms linked, laughing freely, Hermione looking back and forth between Harry and Ron, her hair blowing in a slight breeze, Harry and Ron looking cheerfully at her, all three of their robes billowing out behind them, a view of the forest in the background. "You took it, didn't you, Colin? It's really good."

"What about us?" Ron said indignantly. "We're in it."

She laughed, looking even more radiant than she did in the picture, Harry thought. "Well, now I have photographic proof that my two best friends are the handsomest men at Hogwarts," she said smiling at them both. Ron's ears went quite red; Harry ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'll have to try to undo that haircut. You're going to give me a swelled head, Hermione."

"Oh, no you don't, Harry Potter!" Parvati said suddenly. "You're my masterpiece. Don't you dare!"

Everyone laughed. "Evidently, it's not up to you," Hermione said with difficulty, through her laughter.

The party went on into the night; McGonagall left, having put a soundproofing charm on the tower so that they wouldn't disturb anyone else-- "And I'm trusting you to make sure things don't get out of hand--" she said to Alicia before leaving. When the portrait closed behind McGonagall, Alicia promptly cried, "She's gone!" and Katie turned up the volume on the wireless as a particularly raucous song came on. Harry remember how crazy some parties in the common room had been in the past; when his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire as the *second* Hogwarts champion, the party had gone on into the wee hours.

Parvati steered Hermione to a table for her birthday present: a Tarot card reading. "Actually, Parvati," Hermione was telling her, "in my Arithmancy class, I discovered that the numbers connected with my birthday are *very* interesting. I was born at exactly nine o'clock in the morning, you see. Ninth month, ninth day, ninth hour. Which adds up to twenty-seven, which is three cubed. A number raised to the power of itself. It's a very powerful set of numbers..."

"But, Hermione, you should get a reading on your birthday, to get ready for a new year of your life." Harry had had quite enough of Tarot readings lately, so he went to get something to eat and drink, watching Fred and George dancing what seemed to be some sort of fertility dance, and laughing with everyone else.

After a while, Harry herded the first and second-year boys upstairs, who were looking pretty sleepy, and Alicia took the first and second-year girls. When he returned to the common room, he discovered that a number of the third years had also decided to retire, so that there were considerably fewer people left lounging about. Angelina and George were dancing very closely to a slow ballad on the wireless, and Fred and Katie rose to do the same; there were some sixth-years in a corner, playing Exploding Snap, and Colin was photographing Ginny and some of their fourth-year classmates for his penfriend.

As Harry stepped back into the room, Hermione suddenly grabbed his arm, saying, "You can't get out of it; you have to dance with me now, Mr. Potter. Birthday girl's prerogative." This was nothing like the Yule Ball, Harry decided immediately; she slid her arms up around his neck and pillowed her head on his shoulder. He put his hands on her waist and his cheek on her hair, reeling with how strange this was. He remembered holding her outside the infirmary while they

both had cried, how private that was; it was disconcerting to suddenly have her pressed against him in a room with other people. They moved their feet only slightly, he was hardly aware of the music having words or a rhythm or tune, it was just a roaring in his ears as he held her and felt her heart beating against his chest and he breathed her in.

“Hermione,” he whispered. She looked up. “I have another present for you.” She widened her eyes, looking frightened and hopeful at the same time. “I’ve decided not to become a Death Eater.” She smiled, her look of apprehension evaporating.

“I never seriously thought you would,” she whispered back, pillowing her head on his shoulder again. As the song ended, he felt her trembling, and he didn’t want to let her go, but he was suddenly aware of Ron and Ginny standing nearby, clearly paying close attention to them but trying to pretend that they weren’t. Another slow song began. Harry knew what he had to do. He took her by the hand and led her over to Ron, saying, “Now, the gift was from both of us; I shouldn’t be the only one to get a dance out of it.” He put her hand in his, and Ron and Hermione looked at each other awkwardly, before Hermione smiled in a resigned way and dragged him out to the middle of the floor. Ron’s leg was mostly healed; he was only limping a little.

Then Harry put his hand out to Ginny, smiling at her. “And *you*,” he said, “planned a great party.” He took her out onto the floor too, pulling her too him. She chose to dance in a style more like what they’d all done to open the Yule Ball; she kept her hand in his and put her other hand on his shoulder, while he put his other hand in the small of her back. But after less than a minute, he took his hand from hers and put that one on her back too, forcing her to put her other hand on his shoulder too. She was about an inch taller than him, so they were dancing pretty much eye to eye during the entire song, and Harry found himself with the problem of not being able to look away from her again.

She finally was the one to look away, staring down where she could see the basilisk amulet resting on his shirtfront. “Did you decide what animal you want to be?” she whispered to him. He had been practicing controlling his fingernails with McGonagall every night after dinner, until the party (she had given him the night off), and he’d told her his decision. “Yes,” he said softly. She shivered at the breeze his breath made with his mouth so close to her ear. “Lion.” She nodded.

“You’re training to be an Animagus, aren’t you?” she said softly next to his ear. He looked at her in surprise. She smiled slyly. “You’ve been disappearing with McGonagall every night after dinner. She’s an Animagus and the Transfiguration teacher, and you were asking me about animals...it wasn’t hard to figure out.”

“Sssh!” he said quietly, near her ear again; she shivered again in his arms, but she didn’t seem to mind it. “Don’t tell anyone. It’s meant to be a surprise.”

Suddenly, Harry was aware that the music had stopped, and that people were looking at them. Hermione and Ron weren’t touching. Hermione was peering intently at the two of them. “What are you whispering about?” she asked, trying to sound casual. Harry reluctantly let Ginny go. “Nothing,” he said with as blank a look on his face as he could muster. He looked at Ron, who seemed to be trying to edge away from Hermione; when Harry had glimpsed them dancing, there had been quite a lot of air between, more so than with any of the dancing couples he’d seen all night. He remembered Hermione calling him an immature git. Harry knew--or thought he knew--how Ron felt about Hermione. What was he afraid of? Harry wondered. But at this moment, having just been dancing with him, she looked like the thing she wanted most was to

get away from him. Maybe I'm wrong, thought Harry. Maybe he doesn't feel that way about her at all, I've nothing to worry about.

Except that he did have something to worry about; she wouldn't be so annoyed with Ron if *she* didn't have feelings for *him*. He was just making her miserable. Harry fought the urge to hit him, as he'd wanted to when Ron had made the Othello comment. He strode over to Hermione and quickly kissed her on the cheek.

"Well, happy birthday. I'd better go up the beanstalk here and get some sleep so I can be awake for you to run rings around me in the morning," he said, moving toward the stairs. Suddenly, she was crying, "Oh! I almost forgot!" Harry turned around, wondering what was going on. She motioned for Harry, Ron and Ginny to follow her over to the armchairs near the fire. No one else was nearby, and the music had gotten loud again, although no one was dancing now.

"I found the right fairy-tale!" she said in an excited whisper. "When I was in the library with Neville and you nefarious types were planning this party." She smiled at Ginny, who looked confused.

"What fairy-tale?" she asked Hermione.

"Aren't you doing the geese in Hagrid's class?"

"No, we're doing baby unicorns. He's afraid that not all of the older girls will be able to--get near them," she said, blushing, and Harry remembered that only girls who were virgins could approach unicorns. "He said the geese were for the fifth-years. So what's with the geese? How are they magical creatures?"

"One of them is the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg."

Harry was going to lose it in a second, plus he was very tired. "So? Which fairy-tale is it?"

Hermione looked triumphant. "Jack and the Beanstalk!"

The three of them looked at each other and then at her. "So?" they said at the same time.

"So? I told you that fairy-tales were based on fact; Jack and the Beanstalk is practically a primer on how to get over on a giant. There were a number of magical things that the Jack character stole from the giant's home, and one of them was the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg! I think Hagrid must have made contact with the giants, and he was given the goose as a kind of goodwill gesture..."

"Like giving a gift to an ambassador?" Ginny ventured.

"Exactly! I think it means that the giants will be on the right side; that they won't go over to You-Know-Who! I think Hagrid did it!"

They were all silent. Then Ron said, "What if he stole it?"

Hermione glared at him. "What?"

"What if he did what Jack did, and stole it? What if it doesn't mean anything at all?"

They were all silent. "We do what we usually do," said Hermione. "We confront him about it. That's how we found out how to subdue Fluffy..."

Ron gave a great yawn. "Well, I vote that we do it after having a long lie-in on Sunday morning. Oh, that's right, you two are *insane*," he said, pointing at Harry and Hermione. They all laughed.

"Actually, I will probably have a lie-in tomorrow," Hermione said wearily. "What is it, about two o'clock?" Harry nodded, checking his watch. When they looked up, they were surprised to find that no one else was still in the room. They went to their respective staircases and up to bed, all hoping that Hermione was right about Hagrid and the giants--but not necessarily

believing it.

* * * * *

Chapter Nine

The Date

Harry was not looking forward to the first Hogsmeade weekend, two weeks after Hermione's birthday. That meant, of course, that the day seemed to zoom at him with alarming speed. Schoolwork, prefects' meetings, O.W.L. preparation, Quidditch practice and Animagus training seemed to have little effect on how rapidly the dreaded day approached. He remembered his third year, when he hadn't officially been allowed to go to Hogsmeade because the Dursleys hadn't signed his permission form and everyone was worried about his godfather, Sirius Black, the only escapee from Azkaban ever, possibly lurking around the village waiting to kill him. He had longed for nothing more that year than to be able to go to Hogsmeade, even if he had to wear his Invisibility Cloak and use secret passages out of the castle to do it. Now, Hogsmeade was the last place he wanted to go, especially on a double date with Viktor Krum, Cho Chang and Hermione.

He wished he had progressed further in his Animagus training so that he could just transform into a lion and run off to hide in the Forbidden Forest. He had advanced to being able to grow and shrink his nails (on both his hands and his feet) in the blink of an eye, and also growing and ungrowing his hair (if he'd known it was that easy, he never would have put off the haircut). Professor McGonagall had been impressed by his rapid progress; he wondered whether he might be able to become an Animagus in less than six months.

Harry also had gotten to the point where he definitely needed to start shaving, but he decided to try to control his facial hair using the Animagus technique, too, and found that this worked quite well, and he was able to avoid being cut. No one questioned him about this. Ron used his wand, when he saw enough reddish growth on his chin and upper lip to warrant giving himself a shave. Hermione had suggested he try growing it, as Charlie had done; red beards looked really nice, she told him, coloring. This had greatly annoyed Harry.

That Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione went running as usual. When they were doing the warm-down stretches on the dewy grass of the Quidditch field, Hermione suddenly stopped, then sat down, staring into space. When Harry saw her sitting as if turned to stone, he crept over to her and touched her shoulder.

"Hermione?" he whispered. She looked up at him and he could see the fear in her eyes. "What is it?"

"Harry?" she said, as though she weren't sure of his name. He put his hand to her cheek and she put her hand over his.

"You're worried about Viktor," he stated. She nodded. "Don't be. You won't be alone." She nodded again.

"But--" she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"This thing with fixing up Viktor and Cho. Should we--should we do that to her? What do we really know about him? Maybe I should just break up with him and take my chances..."

"Do you want to do that?" he said gently, moving his hand to her shoulder. "I could cancel the date with Cho. We'll do whatever you want."

Suddenly, Hermione shook herself, as if trying to wake up. She rose gracefully to her feet and

continued the stretching exercises. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm just worrying needlessly. We've got a plan; we'll stick to it. Hold my ankles?" He nodded at her, crouching down to grip her ankles while she did some sit-ups. He watched her closely, the way her face was scrunched up in concentration, the perspiration beading on her brow. Everything she did, she was so *serious* about it. Except Divination, and that had shocked everyone. He tried not to think about Divination; he'd been leaving Sandy in his room for Divination class ever since that first day, and he'd managed to avoid anyone else giving him a Tarot reading since then. He felt like he'd actually gotten better at doing them, though. He had performed one for George which had predicted some behavior of Angelina's that he hadn't suspected in the least. Of course, they hadn't known until afterward that that was what the reading was pointing to. Still...

"Harry!"

"Wha--?"

"I've been sitting here shouting at you. You can let go of my ankles now. I think five thousand sit-ups is pretty much my limit for one morning. It's your turn, now."

"Oh, right." And now she held his ankles while he did sit-ups. He took his shirt off first, wiping some sweat off his brow and then bundling it up to make an ad hoc pillow to put behind his head. He was about half through his sit-ups, counting in his head, trying to block out other thoughts, when a sudden shadow darkened the area of the field where they were. Harry stopped, panting, and looked up--

Into the pale, pointed, and extremely smug-looking face of Draco Malfoy. "Looking good, Granger," he drawled, "for a Mudblood." Harry saw Hermione color. She stood, as did he; he looked up at Malfoy (who was slightly taller than him now). He and the other six Slytherins with him were in their green Quidditch robes and carried what looked like brand new Nimbus 3000 broomsticks--probably courtesy of Lucius Malfoy, thought Harry.

Harry's angry face was very close to Malfoy's. "Language, Malfoy," Harry said in a low, dangerous voice. He clutched his sweaty shirt in his left hand, wishing he had his wand in his right. Malfoy looked down at him.

"Sorry, are you trying to tell me what I'm allowed to say? You're sweating all over our Quidditch pitch, and my team needs to practice."

"Your team?"

"Yes," Malfoy replied, his smugness increasing by the second. "I'm the new captain of the Slytherin team. How do you like that?" Well, that explains all the new broomsticks, Harry thought.

Hermione had come over and stood next to them. "Well, isn't that a coincidence. You see, Harry's now the captain of the Gryffindor team." Malfoy's face lost what little color it had.

"Yes," Hermione went on. "You are both prefects and you are both captain of your house team. Can you give it a rest, already? What are you going to compete over next?"

They both turned to look at her, glowing and tan in the morning sun, her running bra and bicycle shorts making it completely unnecessary to use any imagination in picturing the shape of her body, her short curls clustered around her face. Not wanting to hear what might come out of someone's mouth next, she announced loudly, "I have to go get ready for my date with Viktor Krum!" And she turned and stalked back toward the castle.

Harry thought Draco Malfoy looked slightly dazed, watching her walk off; Harry had to admit, the view was quite nice...But Malfoy turned back to him after a second. "So," Malfoy sneered at him. "The great Harry Potter lost out to Viktor Krum..."

“I wasn’t--” Harry began, then shook his head, smiling. “You can’t get to me, Malfoy. Not today.” He tried to look happier than he felt. “I’m going along with Hermione and Viktor with my own date: the Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang.”

He wished he could have had a camera to record Malfoy’s stunned expression. “But she’s a sixth year!” sputtered Malfoy.

“And she’s really pretty,” said Zabini, awe in his voice.

“Shut up!” Malfoy lashed out suddenly.

“I know,” Harry said, sounding like he was mulling it over. “She is really pretty. I was thinking that when she asked me out in Diagon Alley...”

“She asked you out?” Malfoy was incredulous. Harry was trying not to laugh at his expression. He turned and walked after Hermione, calling over his shoulder, “Have a good day, Malfoy! I know I will!” He turned back in the direction he was walking, wishing that what he’d just said were true, not just a really good way to needle Malfoy.

As he walked away, he heard a Slytherin say, “Every girl in school is slobbering over him these days...”

“Well, look at him. He’ll probably cause a riot, walking into the castle with no shirt on...”

“Shut up, will you?” he heard Malfoy explode again. Harry smiled and kept walking.

The second Slytherin was just about right, however; the moment Harry walked into the entrance hall, he regretted not putting his shirt back on. He thought it was quite possible that Madam Pomfrey would be busy much of the morning from minor injuries to girls who had stumbled on steps or walked into walls because of him. On the third floor, just as Hermione was going into the girls’ prefect bathroom, Cho Chang was coming out. She stopped dead when she saw Harry.

“Harry--” she said softly, staring at him. Harry felt himself reddening,

“Good morning. We were just out running,” he said, gesturing toward Hermione, who smiled at Cho and slipped past her into the bathroom. Cho didn’t look at Hermione.

“Uh-huh,” she said, still gazing at Harry.

“I’m going upstairs to shower now. We’ll go after breakfast.”

“Okay,” she answered, looking a bit glazed-over. Harry continued on up to the fifth floor, wondering whether it was going to be possible to get her to notice that Viktor existed. I hope I’m not getting a big head, he thought.

The ceiling in the Great Hall was the same brilliant, cloudless blue they’d seen while running around the Quidditch pitch earlier in the day. When the post-owls came, a letter to Hermione from Viktor Krum confirmed that he would be meeting them at Honeydukes. After breakfast, Harry looked at Hermione sitting next to him at the Gryffindor table and said, “Ready?” She sighed deeply. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” Ron and Fred looked at each other and nodded for some reason.

Harry and Hermione rose and went over to the Ravenclaw table. Harry tapped Cho on the shoulder and she turned around, smiling broadly when she saw him. He had put on his nicest black robes with his prefect badge, and he wore a simple black button-down shirt under it and black slacks and his black boots he’d worn for gardening, but newly shined and polished. With his newly cut black hair and black glasses, set off by his bright green eyes, he looked every inch a Triwizard Tournament winner.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked her. He tried to ignore the twitters of the other Ravenclaw girls, the elbow nudges being exchanged as Cho’s housemates saw who her date was.

“Yes,” she said simply, evidently not one for banter. She stood and took the arm he offered her--it was old-fashioned, but he it felt oddly appropriate to him, at this moment. They walked out to the entrance hall, all eyes at every house table following them.

As they walked down to the village, Harry tried to engage her in conversation, but every topic he introduced resulted in her making monosyllabic responses that frustrated his attempts. So he tried to make sure they were walking close enough to Hermione so that he could converse with her, and Cho seemed to be perfectly happy to walk along gazing up at him (she only came up to his shoulder) and listening to them talk (although Harry wasn't convinced she really was listening; he and Hermione had each laughed at things the other had said, but no laughter was forthcoming from Cho).

When they reached the village, they walked up the High Street to Honeydukes Sweets Shoppe. Viktor was waiting outside, and kissed Hermione on the cheek when she was close enough. He actually looked like he'd been aiming for her mouth, but she had turned her head and presented him with her cheek at the last second. They bought a few sweets and then strolled through the village streets for a while; Harry was getting more and more tired of trying to talk to Cho, especially now that Hermione was with Viktor. It didn't sound like there was much conversation going on there, either, inasmuch as his English was still heavily accented and there seemed to be a bit of a problem for him with British colloquialisms.

“I learn English from American television programs,” he explained to Hermione.

“But you don't have a television,” she remembered. “You don't even have electricity.”

“Oh, no. I go to the store in Sofia that sells televisions and I stand there and watch until they tell me to go. They don't like people to stay too long who are not going to buy.”

That's scintillating conversation, thought Harry, compared to what I've got here. He had thought perhaps of asking her whether she'd seen the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer, but since that was a whole year ago, and Viktor had played in the World Cup and he didn't want to make it seem that he was gushing over Viktor, he couldn't very well use that topic. He tried to ask her how bad the O.W.L.s really were, but she said, “Oh, they're as bad as you've heard,” and would not elaborate. He tried to ask her what one could expect to cover in sixth-year classes, and she said, “Oh, pretty much what you learn in fifth-year, only more so.” I could have a deeper conversation with a lamppost, Harry thought.

Finally, when it was close to lunchtime, they opted to go to the Three Broomsticks. It was already pretty crowded with students who'd come down from the castle for the day, but they got a table in the corner--which just happened to be near a table with Ron and Fred Weasley, who seemed determined to pretend they didn't recognize their housemates. Harry and Hermione told Viktor and Cho that they would get them all some butterbeers and order some food at the bar.

While they were waiting at the bar for Madam Rosmerta to notice them, they looked over their shoulders at their dates, who didn't exactly seem to be talking up a storm together.

“Hermione, are you sure that love potions are illegal? Because I am dying to put something in Cho's and Viktor's drinks right now to speed up this process. I have never been more bored in my life!”

“Really?” Hermione said, her brow furrowed. “But she's very pretty--”

“Oh, cut it out. You know that's not all I'm looking for--”

“It was last year when you asked her to the Yule Ball.”

Harry grimaced. “I am obviously never going to live that down, am I?”

She smiled merrily at him. "Not for the next hundred years, anyway. Oh, come on, it can't be that bad. Surely there's something you two can do together..."

He didn't take her meaning at first, then as it dawned on him, he exclaimed, "Hermione! How can I go from not even being able to talk to her to kissing her?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think when people have too much to talk about, it can keep them from kissing..." She looked at him very pointedly, and he remembered that moment in the Dursleys' garden when they'd almost kissed, before Sandy had told him that Sirius was coming. He had no answer to this. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"They're moving their lips a little. Maybe an actual conversation is imminent," he said hopefully. Hermione placed an order for four butterbeers and fish-and-chip platters and indicated which table should get the food order. They each carried two mugs of butterbeer back to the table, moving slowly through the crowd more to prolong their absence than because they thought they would spill the beverages.

Harry thought that it was possible now that there was something in the world more boring than one of Professor Binns' classes: a date with Cho Chang. This experience should be bottled and sold as a sleep aid, he thought. Meanwhile, he was acutely aware of Ron and Fred at the next table, trying to hear what little conversation was taking place among those on the date.

Once their food had arrived, at least they had the excuse of having full mouths to avoid talking. Harry had never even experienced such a quiet meal even at the Dursleys, where he routinely got the silent treatment (when he wasn't being given the opposite, the yelling treatment). Even Ron and Fred were starting to look bored, he thought. When Spies Get Bored, Harry pictured the headline in Witch Weekly. By Rita Skeeter. If she were still writing.

After they were done eating, he decided he couldn't take it any more. "Well," he said briskly, "this has been fun, but Hermione and I have a load of homework to do. I have to put in some hours in the Potions dungeon, and didn't you say Professor Vector had given you a ton of Arithmancy homework, Hermione?" His eyes looked pleadingly at her.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "Yes. So much work. Unbelievable." She nodded vigorously. Viktor and Harry paid the bill (Hermione argued with Viktor about paying her way; Cho did not say anything about Harry paying for her, despite having been the one to ask him out). They all rose to go, and as they reached the door, Harry saw out of the corner of his eye that Ron and Fred were also rising to leave.

As they were walking back to the castle, Harry with Cho and Hermione up ahead with Viktor, Harry simply decided to stop even trying to talk with Cho, and she seemed perfectly happy to just walk along, arm in arm, enjoying the spectacle of the autumn colors. Ron and Fred were skulking about forty feet behind them.

When they reached the entrance hall of the castle, Harry extended his hand to Cho, shaking it vigorously, thanking her for a lovely day, and saying that they would have to do it again the next Hogsmeade weekend, but thinking That's five hours of my life I'm never getting back. As they were shaking hands, Ginny emerged from the stairs to the Potions dungeon. She stopped dead when she saw Harry and Cho, frowning at first, then looking happier as she saw that no kissing was following the hand-shaking. Actually, she looked like she was going to laugh, thought Harry, who sincerely hoped she wouldn't. Then he saw Viktor and Hermione over Cho's shoulder, and groaned inwardly; this plan wasn't going well at all...

Their kiss in the entrance hall made the one on the train platform look sick. When they separated, Harry thought Hermione looked like she was having difficulty standing up. Cho went

up the stairs toward Ravenclaw, seeing the end of Viktor's and Hermione's kiss and giving Harry a bit of a hurt look as she left. Viktor departed, and Hermione stood looking out the open door, her brow furrowed, pulling at her lower lip with her right hand.

Ginny started to come toward Harry and Hermione, but suddenly, Draco Malfoy emerged from the same stairs Ginny had ascended. "Ginny!" he called as he climbed the stairs. "You forgot your mortar and pestle..." He handed it to her and while Harry and Hermione whirled in surprise.

"Were you both in the Potions dungeon?" Harry asked suspiciously, just as Fred and Ron entered from the outdoors.

"Yeah. So?" Malfoy said, coming closer to him.

"So what were you doing down there?" Ron wanted to know.

"Potions homework," Ginny informed him stiffly.

Ron regarded Malfoy through narrowed eyes. "And I'm supposed to believe that?" Harry felt rather than saw Ron and Fred come and stand on either side of him, facing Malfoy.

"Yes," Malfoy said as Harry and the Weasley brothers presented a united front. "I do work for my grades, I don't just depend on the goodwill of my head of house. I mean, I believe that Potter and the Mudblood aren't shagging on the Quidditch pitch every morning..."

Simultaneously, Harry and Ron grabbed Malfoy's arms and pinned him to the stone wall; they both quickly whipped out their wands and pointed them at Malfoy's throat. "You stop calling her that, Malfoy," Ron hissed at him. Malfoy grinned evilly at them.

"Ron! Harry! Let go of him!" came Ginny's unexpected voice. "He's my friend!"

"Your friend?" squealed Harry, Ron and Fred. "Hermione is your friend," Harry reminded her.

"Let go of him," she said firmly, and Harry had a sudden vision of her someday being Head Girl. Alicia Spinnet probably couldn't have mustered as much authority, he thought. They released him and Ginny strode over to him. "You know I don't like that word..." she said to Malfoy quietly but sternly.

For the first time since Harry had known him, Draco Malfoy looked abashed. "Sorry--"

"Nope. Not to me. To Hermione." Harry tried to suppress a smile; she was so in charge.

Malfoy walked over to Hermione and looked her in the eye sincerely. "I'm sorry I called you-- that, Granger."

"And--" Ginny prompted him.

"And it won't happen again."

Hermione crossed her arms and looked at him, expressionless. "Apology accepted. Excuse me," she said, going up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry, Ron and Fred were not going anywhere until Malfoy left; none of them wanted him to be alone with Ginny again. She turned to him once more. "Thank you for my mortar and pestle, Draco." Draco ? Harry thought. She was calling him Draco ?

"You're welcome," he smiled at her, and Harry was shocked to see that he could actually produce a smile that wouldn't better be described as a smirk or evil grin. He then shot daggers from his eyes in the direction of Harry and the Weasley brothers before going down another staircase leading to Slytherin house.

Just then, Neville Longbottom emerged from the stairway to the Potions dungeon, carefully carrying a glass beaker which was steaming and obviously hot; he was handling it with dragon-hide gloves. He stopped short when he saw Harry, Ron, Fred and Ginny standing around in the

entrance hall.

“What’s up?” he asked, cautiously eyeing his potion; it looked as though it might have been considering overflowing its container.

“Were you down in the Potions dungeon with Ginny and Malfoy?” Ron wanted to know.

“Yeah. We all had stuff to do. Malfoy was dead useful, actually. Helped me finally get this memory-enhancing potion looking right...” He continued up the stairs, holding it out carefully in front of him.

Fred looked accusingly at Ginny. “Well, why didn’t you say you weren’t alone with Malfoy?” She looked incredulous. “Why didn’t I--what am I, on trial here? Did you ever bother asking? And what if I had been? Why would that mean that we were doing anything other than Potions work? It just so happens that he helped me with my potion, too.” She looked challengingly at Harry and her brothers.

Harry leaned toward Fred and Ron, whispering, “Why don’t you two clear off--let someone who’s not her brother talk to her for a minute, all right?” Ron looked like he wasn’t sure that was such a good idea, but Fred nodded and motioned for Ron to follow him. He did so, looking over his shoulder at them.

Harry and Ginny walked up the stairs more slowly. “Sorry about all this Ginny. Ron and Fred spent the day spying on our date, and I had to actually be on the ruddy stupid date--and I suppose we’re all on edge...”

“So, it didn’t go well,” she said softly.

“That’s an understatement. I won’t bore you with details; I’m already bored enough. No point in doing it to you, too.” He smiled at her, and she gave a feeble smile back. They continued walking upward, slowly and steadily. “But, I suppose it was a bit of a shock to hear you calling Malfoy by his first name...”

She stopped. “Really? I suppose it’s just because--I’ve always thought of him as Draco. It’s his father I think of as Malfoy, since his father...”

“Gave you Tom Riddle’s diary,” Harry finished for her, also stopping. She nodded grimly, then started moving again.

“When he’s not showing off, when he’s not around a lot of people, he can be okay, you know. Actually, he seems a bit--lonely these days. Not even many friends among the Slytherins.”

“Some of them must be his friends. The Quidditch team just voted him to be their new captain.” But then Harry remembered the new broomsticks they’d all been holding. He didn’t have to wonder why they’d voted for him.

“I suppose. But think of this: he helped Neville, which you’d probably never expect, and he helped me, and I’m Ron’s sister, and you know what bad blood there is there.”

“So--I’m supposed to believe Draco Malfoy’s turned over a new leaf?”

“You’re supposed to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“That was the second time today he called Hermione a Mudblood. That’s not helping me give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Well--I have my theory about that...”

He stopped. “What?”

She also stopped. “I think he might have--just possibly--a little crush on Hermione.”

“What? So he insults her with the rudest possible name he could call her?”

“It’s just--I think he knows she’d never give him the time of day. So he tries to convince himself she’s beneath him, or something, because she’s not pureblood...”

He looked at her levelly. "You're pureblood."

Then she surprised him by blushing. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry. I'm also a Weasley....That would be...it would be...Don't be ridiculous," she repeated, finishing lamely. She walked up the stairs ahead of him, moving more quickly this time, and Harry wished he had Moody's magical eye, so he could see her expression.

* * * * *

Chapter Ten

The Top of the Beanstalk

It had been more than two weeks since the date, and Harry was relieved that he didn't have to worry about another date until almost Halloween. In the meantime, he'd been practicing enlarging and shrinking his hands and feet. It was strange to watch, and required a lot of concentration. He was still quite slow at it.

He had run into Cho Chang a couple of times since the date, but each time she looked the other way, and Harry was starting to wonder if he'd blown it. How could they fix up Viktor and Cho if she wouldn't go out with him?

It was Wednesday, and they had just finished their Defense Against the Dark Arts class. It had been Harry's turn to read his essay on Hamlet; he had been quite nervous about it, but Moody seemed to think he'd done well. Hermione had smiled encouragingly at him, all the while, but then, she'd already read it three times, not to mention five earlier drafts. Ron had yet to do his Othello essay; it was written, but he had refused to show it to Harry and Hermione. "You'll hear it when everyone else does," is all he would say.

When they were back in the common room after class, Harry said to Hermione, "I have to talk to you." He walked over to the fireplace and Ron started to follow, but Hermione put her hand out to stop him.

"He said he wants to talk to *me*, Ron."

Harry looked back and forth between them. "Oh--don't worry, Hermione. Ron can hear. It's not--well, anyway, come over here, both of you." Once they were in the armchairs near the fire, Harry looked down at his hands, unable to look at Hermione. "I'm afraid I've botched it all up. With Cho. So we're going to have to come up with a different plan to deal with Viktor because I'm a stupid prat." He looked up at her, into her extremely surprised and confused face.

"Harry--what are you on about?"

So he explained that Cho was giving him the cold shoulder, and Hermione asked, "When did it start? How often have you met with her since we went out? Did she seem distant when you kissed her at the end of the date?"

Harry looked stunned by the barrage of questions. "I-I--" he stammered. "I haven't gotten together with her at all since the date. And--we didn't kiss after the date. I shook her hand."

"WHAT?" Hermione cried, making everyone else in the common room look at her. Hermione cleared her throat and tried to calm down. Ginny came over and sat in the fourth chair.

"What's going on?"

"Ginny--good, we need another woman's point of view. If you went on a date with Harry, and instead of kissing you when it was over he shook your hand, and then he didn't talk to you for more than two weeks afterward, what would you think?"

Ginny looked at Harry, then away. He couldn't help thinking that he would never behave that

way toward her--

"Well," she said softly, "I suppose I'd think that he thought I had some sort of disease."

"Thank you!" Hermione was triumphant.

"What I'd think if you went out with Ginny and did that is that maybe you'd decided you wanted to go on living after all," said Ron in a snarl. Harry scowled.

"We're getting off track," Hermione sounded irritated. "Be the overbearing big brother some other time, Ron. Right now we have to repair the damage Harry's done." She looked thoughtful for a moment, perplexed. "I can't understand why I never noticed you two didn't kiss..."

"Well," Harry said, clearing his throat, "you and Viktor were somewhat--preoccupied."

"Are you sure you want to break up with Viktor Krum?" Ginny said with a smile curling around her lips; Harry thought Hermione might be trying to kill her just by glaring at her.

"Yes," Hermione said emphatically. "I needed to make sure he wouldn't suspect anything yet. But--next time, Ron if you could be waiting in the entrance hall, and look really frantic when we come back, and say the headmaster wants to see us immediately, then we could both make a clean getaway--and then the two of them would be left alone..."

Ron nodded and saluted. "Aye, aye. Will do." Harry held in a comment about how eager Ron was to perform this service.

"And you," she said to Harry, still very much in charge. "Come with me." She went over to an empty table and took out her parchment, a quill and an ink bottle. Ron and Ginny followed.

"Now," she said once he was seated and holding the quill poised over the parchment. "Write what I say." And so he wrote:

Dear Cho,

I'm sorry I've been such a prat. I really enjoyed our date and I'm looking forward to the next one a great deal. I've never dated before and I was extremely nervous. I kept meaning to talk to you since we went out, but the words I want to say always seem to leave me as soon as I see you. Most of all, I'm afraid that my behavior at the end of the date might have given you the impression that I'm no longer interested in you. Quite the opposite.

I know you'll be pretty busy during the next few days getting ready for the Quidditch match with Hufflepuff, but perhaps after you win the game (as I know you will) we can meet in the stands and pretend we're at the end of our date again, and do it properly this time. Again, I hope you'll forgive my stupidity; when I'm around you, my brain doesn't seem to work quite properly.

Affectionately,

Harry

"Do we have to put that bit in about 'stupidity' and me being a prat?"

"Hey, those are your words; just a minute ago you said, 'I'm a stupid prat.' And the answer is yes, it's endearingly self-effacing." Hermione sounded very official. Harry grimaced.

"And what does this bit here mean about doing it properly this time?"

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised. "What do you think?" She watched his face as he furrowed his brow. Then suddenly his bright green eyes went wide and she laughed. "There it is..."

"NO."

"Harry! You have to."

"Hermione! You are having me write a note to her saying, 'Meet me after the match to do some

snogging.”

She shrugged. “So?”

“SO?”

“Harry--this is the plan. Remember?”

He looked down at the parchment and sighed. He thought of her being abducted in Bulgaria, wondering about the lost time, wondering whether she could trust Viktor at all. “I suppose I should take this up to Hedwig,” he said heavily.

Hermione nodded, having won. “Good. I’m glad you see it my way. Now, I have some Arithmancy work to do,” and she took out her books and sat down at the same table. Harry rolled up the parchment and turned to go. Ron went up to the boys’ dorm, looking over his shoulder at Hermione once before ascending the stairs.

As he was climbing out of the portrait hole with the letter, he heard footsteps behind him. It was Ginny. She didn’t say anything, and neither did Harry. They walked silently up to the Owlery together. Ginny still said nothing as he grimly tied the note to Hedwig’s leg and watched her fly out the window. However, as soon as she was irretrievably gone, Harry was at the window, yelling, “Hedwig! Wait! Come back!” But it was too late.

“Oh, Ginny, what have I done?” he cried, anguished. “I don’t know anything about dating, let alone a girl who’s older than me. I can’t do this, I can’t--”

“Harry! don’t worry--”

“Don’t worry! How can I not worry? She’s already thinking I’m a rude, insensitive git, and writing her a letter is supposed to fix that? Not to mention, I’m going to have to pretend I want to kiss her, when it’s pretty much the last thing in the world I want to do, other than kissing Snape or Malfoy--”

“HARRY!” Ginny yelled, grabbing his wrists. He looked dazed, tried to focus on her. “Harry,” she said, smiling now, looking almost like she was trying not to laugh. “I’ve never heard you babble before.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my new language. Babblish.” Then, in spite of himself, Harry cracked a smile, and then laughed outright. Ginny laughed now too, letting go of him and putting her hands up to her mouth. Harry leaned against the wall and just let loose, laughing so hard that his eyes started watering. Ginny held her stomach, laughing breathlessly, then tried to talk, panting.

“Oh, oh, I’ve got a stitch in my side--” she said, leaning against the wall next to him. Gradually, they both quieted and just stood against the wall beside each other, staring into space. Harry had a sudden vision of grabbing her and spinning her around, as he’d done before, then doing something he hadn’t before, bringing his lips to hers...

“You know,” Ginny said suddenly (at least it seemed sudden to Harry), “you look really nice when you’re laughing like that.”

He turned and looked at her. “You look nice all the time,” he said softly, moving his eyes over her thin face, the sprinkling of freckles over her nose, her deep brown eyes, her beautiful flaming hair framing her face...

Ginny’s eyes went very wide, and she looked almost frightened. After a prolonged silence, she said quietly, “Well, Harry, I don’t think you have to worry about Cho.” She walked toward the door. “I think she knows that almost any girl at Hogwarts would want to be in her shoes...”

Harry didn’t move. “Almost?” he smiled. Ginny blushed.

“You know me. I like to be original. Don’t go along with the crowd.” He got her meaning, but it made him feel as though there were a hand crushing his heart.

“Well. That would explain you calling Draco Malfoy your friend.” He went past her, toward the door. His voice sounded rather harder than he had meant it to.

“Harry--” he heard her say in a conciliatory tone behind him. He stopped and spoke with his back to her still, not wanting to look at her.

“I don’t trust him Ginny. Remember--because of his father, you almost died, and I had to kill a basilisk at the age of twelve.”

“He’s not his father.”

“We’ll see,” was all he trusted himself to say, before he left, walking away from her as quickly as he could. So, he thought. She’s over me. Figures. Just as I notice how beautiful she is, what a great person she is...

He tried to shake his head, put her out of his mind, but it seemed that the more he tried, the more he thought of her, so that even when he closed his eyes, what he was most likely to see was Ginny Weasley’s face.

* * * * *

Harry received no answer to his letter to Cho Thursday morning when the post owls came flying into the Great Hall at breakfast. He glanced over at the Ravenclaw table, but neither Cho nor any of her friends took any notice of him.

Hermione was sitting between Harry and Ron. Speaking in a low voice, between bites of toast, she informed them, “We need to confront Hagrid today about the geese. We’ve put it off too long.” They were scheduled to go to Care of Magical Creatures right after breakfast.

“What if he doesn’t want to tell us?” Ron said. “What if he just refuses?”

Hermione shrugged. “We’ve gotten information from him before without his meaning to give it; remember Nicolas Flamel?”

They finished breakfast and shouldered their bags, leaving the castle and walking down to Hagrid’s hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest with the rest of the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. When they arrived, Hagrid was very excited.

“One o’ the geese has laid the golden egg!” he informed them all once they’d assembled.

“Now, each o’ yeh look and see whose it is!”

One by one, they picked their way through the fenced-in yard, practically carpeted with large flattened, smelly piles of goose dung (which not everyone managed to avoid) and inspected their geese and the straw bed each one habitually used. No one seemed to have a goose that had laid an egg at all, let alone a golden one. Finally, Malfoy, grimacing distastefully the entire time, reached his surly goose, picked her up awkwardly to look under her, and then almost dropped her in shock when he found her sitting on a large, blindingly gold egg.

“I’ve got it!” he yelled triumphantly. “I’ve got the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg!” However, just at that moment, his goose got tired of being held in his untutored grasp and started flapping her wings in his face, causing him to lose his grip, but not before she let fly an impressively-sized collection of goose droppings all over his shoes and the front of his beautiful robes with their silver prefect badge.

The goose droppings were not made of gold.

“Don’t drop ‘er!” bellowed Hagrid, striding over to Malfoy and seizing the goose. “Ye’ll hurt ‘er!”

“I’ll hurt *her*?” Malfoy replied, incredulous. Harry had to admit, he looked a lot worse off than the goose. Malfoy never seemed to do well in Care of Magical Creatures; Harry strongly suspected that he regarded it with the same distaste with which Harry regarded Potions. His

robes and shoes were probably completely ruined.

Irritated, Hermione picked her way through the goose dung. She waved her wand casually at Malfoy's robes and shoes, and said tiredly, "*Purgario*. Honestly. Doesn't anyone around here know a simple cleaning charm?" Malfoy's clothing was pristine once more, he saw with shock. "Um, thanks Granger," he said awkwardly. He'd actually managed to be fairly civil to Hermione since the Hogsmead date, and Harry had wondered about Ginny's theory about why Malfoy seemed to usually go out of his way to insult Hermione. Now in her debt, he looked even more ill at ease than when he'd been covered with goose droppings.

"Right!" Hagrid bellowed, coming over to take the gold egg. "And as the winner, ye get a gift certificate fer a free lunch at the Three Broomsticks--not including butterbeer," Hagrid told him, handing him a piece of parchment with the Three Broomsticks logo prominently displayed at the top.

"What?" Malfoy sputtered. "That egg's got to be worth more than a bloody lunch!"

"It was just the luck of the draw, Malfoy. Be grateful fer what ye got. Now, you lot, clean up this yard, feed yer geese, and yeh can go early. Next we'll be starting in on two creatures which each have ter do with yer houses; we'll do one in honor of Slytherin first, and then Gryffindor."

"Well," Ron said in an aside to Harry as they used Hermione's cleaning charm to remove the goose dung from the yard, "it's obvious what that'll be, isn't it? First a snake, then a lion."

"I suppose," Harry said, "but how is the lion going to be magical? I mean, I've read a good bit of the book Sirius gave me about snakes and magic, and I can see the point of that--although all of the spells I've seen so far seem like borderline dark magic--but, a lion?" Harry was especially curious about this since he'd decided to choose a lion for his Animagus transformation.

While the others were cleaning up the yard using Hermione's cleaning charm and caring for the geese (who were busily trying to cover the ground with goose droppings again) Harry, Ron and Hermione came over to Hagrid.

"So," Hermione began in a low voice, "where'd you get the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg, Hagrid?"

He looked shifty-eyed. "On me summer travels."

"Get anything else? A harp? Some magic beans, perhaps...?" Hermione went on fishing. Hagrid smiled.

"Ye've figured it all out, have ye Hermione?" She blushed and looked down. "Well, you three stay when the others are done, before yer next lesson. There's someone I've been meaning fer yeh ter meet." He disappeared around the back of his hut, and they returned to the yard to help with the cleaning.

When the Slytherins and the other Gryffindors moved off to have some free time before Herbology, Harry, Ron and Hermione stayed behind with Hagrid. He took them around behind his hut, then told them to leave their bags there before going into the Forbidden Forest. This wasn't the first time Harry and Ron had been in the forest; they'd had a harrowing encounter with Aragog, a giant spider who was actually friends with Hagrid (although he was still planning to eat them until they were rescued by Ron's father's magic car, which had gone into the forest and become wild). Harry had also been in the forest once with Hermione and Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy when they'd all had detention during their first year. Harry never exactly looked forward to going into the forest; he felt it was forbidden for many excellent reasons.

Hagrid walked ahead of them with his boarhound, Fang, while Harry, Ron and Hermione followed, wands out (Hagrid didn't notice this). They walked far enough into the forest that when Harry looked behind him, he had trouble seeing through the trees to the rest of the school grounds. Looking ahead, he wondered where Hagrid could be taking them. Since they were being taken into the forest by a teacher, they couldn't technically get into trouble for breaking the rule against going into the forest, but they *could* get into trouble by running into some of the more unpleasant residents of the forest.

Finally Hagrid stopped. "Here we are. Yeh can finally meet 'er."

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked around at the trees that were still everywhere. Her? Her who? Then Hermione, shaking, put her left hand on Harry's right arm and her right hand, still holding her wand, on Ron's left arm. "Look up," she whispered.

Harry and Ron tipped their heads back, as Hermione was doing, and realized that what they had thought were two very sturdy, large trees were actually a person's legs swathed in a rough brown material that was serving as a kind of hosiery; the legs disappeared into a greenish knee-length dress (the hem was about seven feet off the ground) and the head of the person in front of them had to be a good twenty feet off the ground. Oddly, when he looked up into her face, Harry saw what Hagrid had looked like as a child (he'd seen a picture), without his whiskers, but with longer hair and a slight feminine softening of the features, now rather wrinkled and lined. "Meet me Mum, Fridwulfa!" he declared gleefully, waving his large hands. Standing about ten feet tall, Harry had always thought that Hagrid was plenty big, but now, meeting his full-giant mother, Harry thought of 'big' in a whole new light. "Mum--meet--"

"Oh!" his mother cried, hurting their ears. Hagrid shushed her, so she whispered after that (whispering for her was louder than shouting for most people). "You must be the little girl my Rubeus said figured it all out! Dead smart, 'e says you are..." And with that, she reached out and picked Hermione up around her middle, making her scream shrilly, with a pitch and longevity that Harry had never heard from her before. He was afraid that rather than being just 'dead smart' Hermione would simply wind up dead.

"You put her down!" Ron screamed, brandishing his wand at her. "I'll--I'll--" but Ron seemed to be at a loss for the right hex to put on someone holding a human being fifteen feet in the air; he didn't want her to drop Hermione.

"Oh," she said again, softly (for her). "Sorry." She set Hermione down again slightly in front of Harry and Ron; she sagged and Ron picked her up quickly, scooping one arm underneath her knees and the other around her back, cradling her; Harry was surprised, he made it look so easy. Ron usually looked rather lacking in muscles. Hermione pillowed her head on his chest, looking shell-shocked and as if she were on the verge of gibbering.

"Don't do that again!" Ron yelled up angrily at Hagrid's mother, holding Hermione closely. She frowned, which worried Harry, as he felt her behavior to be a bit unpredictable. He remembered Ron telling him at the Yule Ball the previous year that giants were just *vicious*. They just liked to kill. He thought a little diplomacy couldn't hurt.

"Uh, what he meant was, it's polite to ask someone first if they *want* to be picked up."

"Oh, look at you! I bet I know who you are..." and here came her hand again. Harry braced himself, his eyes closed, but then nothing happened. He opened them again and looked up at her. She was leaning over, her hand poised to pick up Harry. "May I?" she asked extremely politely. Harry was unsure whether she was mocking him. He nodded and steeled himself for being tightly squeezed around the middle. But she was actually quite gentle with him; she had

him straddle her index finger somewhat like a broomstick, holding onto her thumb to keep his balance.

“Those eyes, that scar--you must be ‘Arry Potter!”

He tried to feebly smile while simultaneously trying to keep his balance and not spew his breakfast all over her hand. “I must be...” he trailed off feebly.

“Rubeus ‘as told me so much about you!” Harry had gotten slightly gushy responses before from people in the magical world who knew who he was, but never anyone quite so intimidating as Hagrid’s mother.

“She was mighty impressed, mum was, when I told ‘er what good friends we is,” said Hagrid. “Yes, well,” Harry said articulately. He looked down; the earth seemed a long way down, and he felt his stomach move uncomfortably inside him as she moved her hand casually. He never felt sick when riding a broomstick, but then he was the one in control of his Firebolt. “Actually,” he said, trying to keep his voice even, “if it’s all the same to you, I think I’d like to go back down now.” He swallowed a mouthful of stomach acid.

“All right, dear. ‘Ere ye go.” And she lowered him gently to the ground again. Hermione had convinced Ron that she could stand up again, but she was white as a ghost; all signs of her summer tan were gone. When Harry arrived back down on the ground again, she gave an inarticulate cry and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his neck. He patted her back quickly.

“I’m all right,” he said softly. “It’s okay.” He saw Ron’s face and swiftly took her arms from around him and looked her in the eye. “Get a grip,” he whispered.

She looked at him, actually starting to smile a little. “You should talk. Your face is green.”

He swallowed again. “I was starting to relive my bacon and eggs from breakfast.”

Ron came over then, and Hagrid spoke again. “Mum has convinced about ‘alf o’ the British expatriate giants to come over ter our side. The goose was a goodwill gesture from their leader-in-exile.”

Hermione looked pleased at having guessed correctly on this. But Harry was concerned about something else. “Only half? What about the rest?”

“Oh, well,” Hagrid’s mother hesitated. “The rest of the ex-pats are still a bit upset about their exile. But I don’t think they want ter support You-Know-Who. They just want to stay in the mountains o’ Georgia an’ Ukraine an’ not be bothered with what’s happenin’ in the rest o’ the world. Well, most of ‘em, anyway...” And did *they* want to support Voldemort? Harry wondered.

“Mum’s goin’ ter stay ‘ere fer a while. Dumbledore figured the forest at Hogwarts’d be a pretty safe place for ‘er. Plus some friends of ‘ers’ll be showin’ up soon.”

“Um,” Ron started, “how many friends?”

“Oh,” she said thoughtfully, “six or seven.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other with alarmed expressions. Six or seven giants would be living on the grounds of Hogwarts? That sounded like possibly more trouble than Hagrid trying to raise a dragon in his one-room wooden hut.

“Well,” Harry said, checking his watch, “it was nice to meet you, but we’d better be getting to our next lesson. I’m sure we’ll be seeing you again.”

“All right. You run along now and be a good girl and boys. Listen to yer teachers!”

“Yes ma’am,” they mumbled, raising their hands in a farewell (they finally decided to put away their wands). Hagrid led them out of the forest once more; they were all still a little shaky in the

legs from the encounter with his mother. Harry had had no idea what it would be like to confront someone that large. And she was friendly. Confronting an unfriendly giant was something he didn't even want to think about.

* * * * *

At breakfast on Saturday morning, Harry finally got an owl from Cho with a note:

Harry--

I will meet you in the stands after the match.

--Cho

Ron sat between Harry and Hermione, reading over Harry's arm. "Not exactly a mushy gushy love note, is it?" Ron said.

"Why would it be? He's been beastly to her. That was supposed to be the latter part of the plan, Harry," Hermione informed him, just a little snidely.

"Yeah, yeah. I screwed up. Are we done with the Harry-bashing now?"

"Just make sure you two have a good snog," Ron told him. "And then tell me all about it."

Harry and Hermione each punched him on his right and left arms at the same time. "Hey! Ow! Just kidding!"

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," Hermione began, but Ron interrupted her.

"Well, since this is Harry we're talking about, I thought--hey!" he yelled as they both punched his arms again.

Harry laughed. "C'mon. We need to get our Quidditch practice in this morning, since the match is after lunch." He rose, picking up his Quidditch robes and broom, as did the other members of the Gryffindor team. Hermione walked with them to the entrance hall and then went up the steps towards the library. Harry started out the door with the others, then thrust his robes and broom at Ron, saying, "I just remembered something. Take my stuff. I'll be right there." Ron took Harry's things and left with the others.

Harry sprinted up the stairs, catching up with Hermione easily. "Hermione! I have to talk to you..."

She turned with a surprised look. "Oh! Well--let's go in here," she said, leading him into the Charms classroom. Harry paced back and forth, unsure of how to start. After a few minutes of this, Hermione was getting impatient. "Is there something you actually wanted to talk about, Harry, or was I just supposed to watch you pace all morning?"

He finally stopped and faced her. "I can't go through with it. Cho. This afternoon. I can't. I have no idea what I'm doing. It'll just be worse than before. She'll think I'm a complete idiot."

Hermione smiled at him; great, he thought. She thinks this is funny.

"Oh, Harry. You're just nervous. Here: I'll show you everything you need to know."

Hermione walked up to him and stood a mere inch away. Harry could feel the warmth of her body. She was wearing a very form-fitting blue sweater and some jeans. She took his left hand and moved it to the small of her back, making him think this was some kind of dance lesson, then she put his right hand behind her neck. She slid her hands up around his neck and said, "Right. Now you want to tilt your head a little to the right--or if she's already tilting to the left, do it to the left. You don't want colliding noses. Now, don't press too hard at first, you're not trying to put a wax seal on a letter; it's a kiss. Now, if it seems like she's okay with all that, you can carefully and slowly open your mouth," but now Harry's mind was reeling, and the rest of what she was saying was just rushing wind and noise. *Was she really talking about tongues?* he wondered for a moment. His mind was spinning. He was only vaguely aware of the fact that

he was still holding her.

Then it was quiet again and she was staring at him. "Harry? Harry! Have you been listening to me?" He nodded dumbly, hoping she wouldn't start quizzing him on what she'd said. "Okay, then. I'm Cho. Kiss me."

He goggled at her. "Excuse me?"

"Pretend I'm Cho. Kiss me."

Harry thought he had stopped breathing. He looked down at her. He remembered how much he had wanted to kiss her in the garden on Privet Drive, before Sirius had arrived. Had that really been two months ago? he wondered. He hadn't remembered feeling anxious about kissing her then; he had just felt compelled to do it (at least, until it seemed that they might have an audience). Why had that felt so natural, why did this feel so different? Because, he realized, she's just being a teacher right now, it's so that I can kiss another girl.

Harry leaned closer and closer to her mouth. *Just get it over with*, he thought. So he finally did it; he pressed his lips against hers, feeling an equal pressure coming from her as he used his hand behind her neck to hold her face up to his. Then it seemed that she was trying to draw a breath, and she opened her mouth. Harry did the same, and then the world dropped away from beneath his feet, and he was drinking her in, her hands had entwined themselves in his hair, he felt her tongue flick at his teeth and her body mold itself to his. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more in the world but to go on kissing her like this forever...

She moved her hands to his ears, tracing them dreamily while they continued to kiss; the tickling sensation electrified all of Harry's senses and he clutched her even more tightly. Then she brought one of her hands down and found the hem of his shirt; she wormed her hand underneath it and slid it up between his shirt and his skin, making him gasp against her mouth. Then he lost her mouth, and he felt bereft, but she had clamped it on his neck, producing new amazing sensations there with her lips and tongue, and he bent over to kiss her neck, making her produce a gurgling in her throat that sent a thrill of power through him, as he moved his left hand to the hem of her sweater and up her back, caressing the smooth skin there, feebly realizing after a minute that *there was no bra strap*. Oh, Hermione, he groaned inwardly, what are you doing to me...

He captured her mouth again with his, trying to get up the courage to move the hand that was under the back of her sweater to the front, when suddenly, a whoosh of cold air entered the room and a familiar voice started crying, "Students snogging in the Charms classroom! Snogging in Charms!"

It was Peeves the Poltergeist. His arrival was like twenty cold showers to Harry. He separated himself totally from Hermione, trying to catch his breath. She was glaring at Peeves as though she would kill him again, if she could.

She pulled out her wand from a long, thin pocket in her jeans, below the knee. She strode over to Peeves and pointed it, saying sternly, "*Anima tua; anima mea!*" Peeves froze in the air where he'd been hovering over Professor Flitwick's desk. She said to Peeves, "You didn't see anything. You were on your way to the Great Hall; you were asking us whether we'd seen Nearly Headless Nick, and we said no. Understand?"

He nodded. "I understand," he said in a monotone Harry had never heard him produce before. Usually he was incapable of not sounding like he was singing mockingly.

Hermione pointed her wand at him again and cried, "*Anima tua!*" Peeves seemed to wake up and shook himself.

“Are you sure--” he started to say.

“We haven’t seen Nearly Headless Nick,” Harry said. Peeves went whipping out of the room. Harry looked at Hermione. “Where did you learn that? That was amazing!” He hoped she realized that he meant the incantation to control Peeves; although he thought what they’d been doing before that had been amazing, too.

“I found it in a book at Viktor’s. Truthfully, it’s some mild dark magic. Anything to control ghosts is. It’s something like an Imperius Curse that works on spirits, but I can’t get in trouble for using it because he’s already dead. It’s like putting him under hypnosis, basically. His will becomes mine for a short time.”

Harry gazed at her, more impressed than ever. She was becoming a very powerful witch, he realized. The desire to kiss her again was almost overwhelming, but she had moved to the door of the classroom. “Well, you’ll--you’ll be fine later, I’m sure,” she said, losing a little of her composure for a moment. “You’d better get down to the Quidditch pitch for practice, since you’re the captain.”

No, thought Harry. I want to hold you again...

When he went out into the corridor, she was gone. He went back down the stairs again to the entrance hall and into the brisk autumn sunshine, but for the rest of the morning, in his mind, he was back in the Charms classroom holding her in his arms.

* * * * *

After Quidditch practice, it would have been time for lunch in the Great Hall, but Hermione had a surprise for the team. She showed up with levitating picnic baskets full of food at the end of practice, and they were all able to eat outdoors together. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had helped as well, and they were all merrily anticipating watching the match to be played after lunch.

“Well, you know the house elves,” she said to Fred and George as they chewed their sandwiches. “Can’t wait to give food away.”

“Given up on *spew*?” Ron asked her.

“I’ve decided to take a different long-term approach. Any enslaved group must want to be liberated. In fact, I’ve already talked to Professor Dumbledore about a plan of mine, and he’s on board with it; he would like the elves to want to be free as much as I do.” Ron looked dubious about any plan to propagandize the house elves, but didn’t say anything, just took a big bite of his sandwich.

Harry couldn’t take his eyes off Hermione during the picnic; he thought it was possible that Ron and Ginny had noticed too, but he was beyond caring. The important thing was that Hermione *didn’t* notice; she seemed to be studiously ignoring him, chatting up everyone there except him, as though he were less than a ghost.

Harry technically watched the match, but he really was seeing it through a fog. He was sitting between Ron and Fred. George and Angelina were on the other side of Fred; Hermione was sitting in front of him with Ginny and Parvati and Lavender. Colin Creevey was taking pictures of all the Gryffindors again. Harry had a feeling that he would turn out looking pretty surly in these pictures.

He was finally able to focus at the end of the game. Quite suddenly, it seemed (although the match had been going on for an hour and a half), Cho had captured the Snitch and was flying a circuit around the field with it held above her head. Harry noticed for the first time that the new Hufflepuff Seeker was Justin Finch-Fletchley. Cedric Diggory had been captain and Seeker for

the Hufflepuff Quidditch team before he died. *No*, Harry told himself sternly. *I will not think of Cedric right now.*

He stood and clapped with the rest of the Ravenclaw supporters. The Gryffindors were supporting Ravenclaw on this day on his behalf, he knew, since they now thought of Cho as his girlfriend (the ones who didn't know about the plan to fix her up with Viktor Krum). He still had his Gryffindor Quidditch robes with him from the morning's practice, as well as his Firebolt.

One by one, the other people in the stands left and Cho managed to separate herself from the ecstatic Ravenclaws and climb the steps to where Harry was sitting, waiting for her.

She sat down next to him, still glowing from the match. The wind stirred her hair and she smiled at him. She really did look pretty, he thought. But she's not Hermione...

"Hi," he said. He knew that being a person of few words wasn't a problem for her; she'd hardly spoken at all during their date.

"Hi," she said. She edged closer to him. She still wore her blue Quidditch robes, but she put her broomstick on the seats in front of her.

"Good game," he said, smiling at her. She still smiled back.

"You said something in your note about pretending it's the end of our date..."

Harry goggled; not only was this the longest sentence he'd ever heard her utter, but she was getting right to the point.

"Well," he hesitated, "first, I hope you've forgiven me..."

She was smiling even more broadly. "Apology accepted." She leaned in toward him, and he tried to remember everything that Hermione had said, and instead wound up thinking about kissing Hermione again...

But now her lips were pressing against his, so he decided to just surrender, closed his eyes and kissed her back, daring after a moment to open his mouth slightly. She responded enthusiastically, sliding her arms around him and also opening her mouth, and now Harry tried to imagine that she was Hermione, but although it was nice, it just wasn't the same. In fact, he was getting rather bored. He opened his eyes, looking over her shoulder, still kissing her, and noticed a red Gryffindor Quidditch robe that someone from the team had left in the stands.

Then he moved his eyes up to the sky and saw that Ginny Weasley was flying back to the Quidditch stands; she didn't have a robe with her. It must be hers on the seats there.... Then Harry saw that she'd seen them, and the look on her face made his heart stop. He pushed Cho away from him as Ginny, stricken-looking, turned her broomstick sharply and sped up to the Astronomy Tower. And she'd as much as told him that she was over him. She must have been trying to convince *herself*.

He looked back at Cho, who was none too pleased. "Sorry," he said breathlessly. "Gotta run. Just remembered something I--forgot," he finished lamely. He grabbed his and Ginny's robes and leapt onto his Firebolt, speeding up to the Astronomy Tower after Ginny. He was sick at heart that she'd seen him kissing Cho, although he knew that Ginny knew about the plan. He didn't even like Cho, she meant nothing to him.

But when he landed, Ginny was no longer on the top of the tower. Harry ran down the steps, clutching the robes and his Firebolt, wishing he dared ride it inside the castle in order to reach Gryffindor Tower more quickly. When he finally stumbled in the portrait hole, only Dennis Creevey was in the common room; everyone else was probably outside enjoying the beautiful autumn day. Where had Ginny gone?

"Dennis, have you seen Ginny Weasley?" he panted, looking around frantically as though it

were possible for her to blend in with the upholstery with that flaming hair of hers. He looked up from his reading, surprised. "Funny you should ask. She came tearing in here a minute ago, then went tearing out again."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, but it looked like she had her cauldron and mortar and pestle with her."

The Potions Dungeon, thought Harry. That would require some delicacy, in case she wasn't alone. Without saying anything else to Dennis, he bolted up the staircase to the boys' dorms, threw his and Ginny's Quidditch robes and his broom on his bed and grabbed his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk, stuffing it under his shirt to hide it. He went bolting down the staircase again and practically leapt out the portrait hole while Dennis yelled after him, "You're welcome!"

As soon as he could, he ducked into an empty classroom and put the cloak on, then proceeded to run as fast as he could down to the dungeons. Luckily, he met no one on the stairs on a Saturday afternoon, since anyone who had been around would have wondered how the sound of rapidly running feet was being made. Harry was grateful to Sandy that she had given him the idea to take up running.

He tried to slow down in the passage outside the potions dungeon, to catch his breath, so he wouldn't be heard. Luckily, the door to the room was open. Harry crept in and went to the front of the room, since Ginny was working in the back, near the door to the corridor. He didn't want her to hear him breathing slightly hard still from all of the running. But she was actually making quite a racket, her fire under her cauldron crackling away while she crushed beetles with her mortar and pestle, sniffing loudly, her eyes wet with tears. She was alone. He decided to leave, take off the cloak and return to talk to her. But just as he reached the door, he risked running straight into someone and had to back up suddenly so that they wouldn't know he was creeping around under an Invisibility Cloak.

It was Draco Malfoy.

* * * * *

Chapter Eleven

The Potions Dungeon

Malfoy saw that Ginny was in distress and immediately strode over to her, dropping his potions equipment on the floor noisily.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, but not in his usual imperious way.

"Oh, Draco!" she sobbed, throwing her arms around his neck, crying onto his shirt. He didn't hesitate for a moment, but gathered her to him, stroking her hair. Harry itched to take the cloak off so he could tear them apart, but he managed to restrain himself. Malfoy held her for quite a while, until she cried herself out. As her breathing returned to normal and she let out a great, tired sigh, he kissed her on the forehead and held her at arms' length.

"Feeling better?" he said quietly.

She hastily separated herself from him and smoothed down her clothes, clearly embarrassed. She wiped her eyes and said shakily, "I have a lot of work to do."

Malfoy looked as Harry had never seen him, genuinely concerned and caring. "What happened?" he asked her.

"I--I saw--saw Harry. Harry kissing Cho Chang. In the Quidditch stands," she said brokenly.

Then in a rush: “And even though I know that he doesn’t really care about her, even though I know he and Hermione are just trying to fix her up with Viktor Krum so Hermione can be rid of him, that doesn’t mean—that doesn’t mean--” she looked like she might break down again.

“That doesn’t mean he has to look like he’s *enjoying* it so much!”

Enjoying it? Harry thought. *Hardly.*

Malfoy nodded. “Ah. This is about Potter.”

“*Harry,*” she corrected him.

“Okay--Harry.” Even to Harry’s ears, it sounded unnatural for Malfoy to call him this. He could tell it felt extremely unnatural to Malfoy. “And--did you say he and Granger are trying to fix up Krum and Cho Chang?”

“Oh!” Ginny was distressed for yet another reason. “I shouldn’t have said anything--don’t tell anyone I said that, *please--*”

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” he said, trying to calm her. “I won’t say a word.” Harry thought, *Yeah, right.* “So what, Potter and Granger will be free to be together then?”

Ginny looked up at him, stricken. Harry groaned inwardly; sometimes Malfoy was too smart for his own good. “I--I don’t know. Maybe...”

“Well, good riddens to him, I say,” was Malfoy’s hard reply. Ginny looked like she was about to argue, but he went on, “Look, he’s just not worth getting so upset about. How could he be? He ignored you for *three years*. How could he know how you felt about him all that time and not care? How could he not--see you?” he ended softly, lifting up her chin and kissing her on the lips briefly, softly.

Harry was going crazy, dying to spring across the room, throw off the cloak--but again not daring to. Mostly he didn’t because he hated the fact that Malfoy was right; he deserved for Ginny to forget about him and move on. He didn’t deserve for her to go on mooning over him, she didn’t deserve for him to go on taking her for granted. Somehow, he managed to forget that he had spent much of the day thinking about kissing Hermione.

Ginny ducked her head and said softly, “You’re supposed to be tutoring me in potions.” To Harry’s relief, she didn’t throw her arms around Malfoy and enthusiastically return the kiss. The tentative delicacy of that kiss had surprised Harry.

“Right,” Malfoy said reluctantly, turning to retrieve his potions supplies from where he’d unceremoniously flung them down when he’d entered.

Harry decided to stay and keep an eye on them while they worked; Malfoy gazed at her and touched her hand quite a lot for Harry’s taste while they were working, but nothing else untoward happened; they neither kissed nor hugged again.

Then after they’d all three had been in the dungeon for about an hour, Snape entered and stopped abruptly, obviously surprised to see them there.

“Good afternoon, Miss Weasley, Mr. Malfoy,” he said stiffly once he’d recovered. “I didn’t expect to find any students down here at this time.” He looked nervous, as though he were up to something he shouldn’t be. Why would he look like that entering his own classroom? Harry wondered.

“Draco’s tutoring me, Professor. He’s been very helpful,” Ginny volunteered.

“Tutoring, Miss Weasley? You’re at the top of your class; in fact, I am to understand from your other teachers that you are at the top of all of your classes.” Harry felt his jaw drop from shock. He could see some surprise on Malfoy’s face as well.

“Well, I thought it couldn’t hurt to get a start on the O.W.L.s. I’ll be in fifth year before I know

it..."

"Highly commendable. And you know, Gryffindor and Slytherin cooperation has been known to happen before. Carry on," he said, looking at them kindly. Harry was shocked; he'd never known Snape to be nice to a Gryffindor student. But if Ginny was at the top of all of the fourth-year classes, she would command a certain respect even from him. Hermione didn't, but then Ginny obviously wasn't as--obvious as Hermione was when it came to her grades. Harry had had no idea that Ginny was the best student in her year, and he thought that most other people were also ignorant of this.

Now Snape was heading toward the door to his office; Harry decided to follow him in if he could. Snape unlocked the door and walked to his desk, leaving the door open. Harry slipped in, relieved, but then Snape waved his wand at the door and it closed and locked, panicking Harry; he was stuck in Snape's office now until he opened the door again. He hoped Snape didn't have some device for detecting the presence of people wearing Invisibility Cloaks. Snape now pointed his wand at the fireplace, lighting it, and settled heavily in a wing chair by the hearth. Harry almost cried out and gave himself away when Sirius' face appeared in the flames half a minute later.

"Hello, Snape," was Sirius' cautious greeting.

"Black," was Snape's even briefer reply. Sirius grimaced.

"If we're going to be doing this, perhaps we should try Severus and Sirius," Harry's godfather suggested.

Snape looked like he'd eaten an Every Flavor Bean that tasted like ear wax. "Sirius," he said slowly, carefully.

"That's better. So, Severus, How soon will the Polyjuice Potion be ready?"

"Four weeks, technically. But I won't be able to get their hairs for another two weeks after that, at the Quidditch match the first weekend in December. We can use it any time after that. My sources tell me that there will be an important meeting just after the winter solstice, on Christmas night." Polyjuice Potion? thought Harry. Sirius and Snape were going to use Polyjuice Potion? Who were they planning to impersonate? he wondered.

"Christmas?" Sirius looked concerned. "I just hope that's not too late. Death Eater activity has been spotted around Ottery St. Catchpole in just the last few days."

Ottery St. Catchpole! Harry thought. That's the village near the Burrow! Oh, God, he thought, if anything happened to the Weasleys...

Sirius went on. "I've been unable to convince Molly and Arthur Weasley to go away on a holiday for a while. Fortunately, Bill and Charlie are still on hand to keep an eye on things, but--"

"What?" Snape was impatient.

"I think we have a weak link. Percy Weasley."

Snape sat up. "How so?"

"Well, he's been transferred to his father's department at the ministry so Arthur can keep an eye on him. Fudge is concerned that Percy was so blind to his boss' problems last year; Percy had no clue that Crouch was in his son's thrall, and oblivious then to the fact that he was receiving instructions from a dark wizard. It's not clear that Percy himself wasn't under the Imperious Curse as well."

"Plenty of people find it difficult or impossible to resist the Imperious Curse," Snape said quietly, looking uncomfortable and making Harry wonder.

“Yes, but Percy just--he reminds me uncomfortably of--another former Head Boy who was so brilliant in his classes and so ambitious...”

“You think Percy Weasley is another Tom Riddle?” Snape asked him.

“I think--he’s easily manipulated and ambitious. I think he could be ripe for recruitment to the Death Eaters. If someone offered him the kind of power he craves...”

“Now, now, Black,” Snape seemed to have given up on calling Sirius by his first name. “His brother was also a top student and Head Boy. Do you think he’s about to become a Death Eater, too?”

“Bill’s not a sycophant,” Sirius told him. Harry remembered what Hermione had said to Ron outside the Potions Dungeon. “Percy’s been bothering other department heads at the ministry ever since he was transferred to Arthur’s department, trying to get a job elsewhere. There’s obviously no opportunity for advancement in his own father’s department, not without displacing Arthur. I’ve heard people say that Percy Weasley’s goal is to be the youngest ever Minister of Magic.”

“That doesn’t mean he would betray his family and become Dark.”

“No, it doesn’t. But it does mean he could be targeted for recruitment, and even if he resists, that means trouble. So now, we have to find out about both him and Harry when we use the Polyjuice Potion.”

Find out what about me? Harry thought.

“I find it hard to believe that Voldemort would be having such a change of heart concerning Potter,” Snape said.

“But Percy and Harry are exactly the sort of wizards that Voldemort always targeted for recruitment.” Harry remembered the Tarot reading he’d been trying to put out of his mind; so Sirius was also worried about Voldemort recruiting him. “He’s seen now how powerful Harry is--Harry dueled with Voldemort and walked away. The only other living wizard who’s done that is Dumbledore. Voldemort always wanted the best and the brightest. Very few Death Eaters--I’d say Peter Pettigrew is the exception--weren’t outstanding students in school. That’s one of the reasons he went after Lily and James.”

“Well, that and the prophecy. Once he’d worked out who two of the the three people in the prophecy were...”

“He tried to recruit their parents to raise their children to be his servants, so his potential enemies would be under his control...”

“But the Potters didn’t cooperate as the Malfoys did...”

What? Harry thought. *I’m in some prophecy? And so is Malfoy?*

“Speaking of which,” Sirius said, “we never did work out who was going to be who when we take the potion. I thought I would be him, and you could be her...”

“Not so fast, Black. I am the one going to all this trouble to make the potion, and getting their hairs for the final touch. Plus, I need to be him because I have the Dark Mark on my arm still; she is not a Death Eater. When Voldemort summons the Death Eaters, a Mark that is only appearance, as yours would be, would not behave the same as the real thing. And you will have to make sure that he does not go to Voldemort when summoned.”

“True. If two of him showed up, that would ruin everything. All right. I just hope they’re not planning to recruit Draco already. I mean, he’s only--what? Fifteen? He’s a few weeks older than Harry. They can’t want someone so young, can they? I mean, Harry is one thing, he’s *Harry Potter...*”

“Quiet! Even as we speak, Draco Malfoy is right here in the Potions Dungeon, working with the Weasley girl...”

“*What?*” Sirius cried, not heeding Snape’s suggestion that he be quiet. “Is it possible that his father is already grooming him? Do you think Lucius put him up to it?”

The Malfoys, Harry realized. *They’re going to use the Polyjuice Potion to impersonate the Malfoys.*

Snape rose and went to his office door. Harry pressed himself into the bookcase to prevent Snape coming in contact with him and detecting his presence. Snape lifted the black curtain over the small window at the top of the office door. He smirked, and walking back to his chair by the hearth, said to Sirius, “I think his hormones put him up to it...”

Sirius didn’t say anything and Snape sat again, staring into space as if in a daze. “She looks strangely like Lily...” he said quietly, as though he forgot he were having a conversation with someone.

“Now, now, Severus, she’s a student...” Sirius chided him with a smirk.

Snape rounded on him, furious. “How dare you! She’s only fourteen! I would never--”

“All right! All right! I know. Can’t you take a joke?” There was an awkward pause, then Sirius said quietly, “You know, we were all in love with her. Even though I--went with other girls. Even Peter, although he wouldn’t have admitted it. I could see it when he looked at her. Remus, too. And James, naturally. We were just livid that she had a boyfriend from Slytherin...”

It took Harry a minute to make sense of all this. Snape had been talking about Ginny looking like his mother, and Sirius was talking about the entire Marauder Gang being in love with his mother--Sirius, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew (also known as Wormtail) and his father, James Potter. But who was this Slytherin boyfriend? he wondered. Then, with a shock he knew. *That was the Gryffindor-Slytherin cooperation Snape had been talking about...*

“It wasn’t you,” Sirius went on. “It wasn’t personal. I think we all thought if she was going to go with anyone, it would be one of us.”

“So that’s why you pushed her away? Made her feel excluded? Why do you think she turned to me?”

“We were protecting her, you know that. James and Peter and I were learning to become Animagi so we could accompany Remus when he changed. We didn’t want Lily to get hurt. Plus--you know how she was. So by the book. She would have tried to talk us out of doing it. She would have told us it was wrong.”

“It *was* wrong. Just as it was wrong not to tell her...”

“Why are you complaining? She became your girlfriend because of it.”

“Yes, but it was also because of you that she left me.”

“Because of me? You were the one snooping around trying to find out what was going on every month during the full moon.”

“Didn’t you ever wonder why I had such a need to know? It was Lily; she came to me in tears, wanted me to find out what was going on. She felt her friends didn’t trust her, didn’t want to confide in her. You cut her off and didn’t expect her to react? She wasn’t made of stone, you know.” Snape sounded more human than Harry had ever heard him; listening, he found himself taking Snape’s side, unexpectedly. When he was in third year and found out about the Marauder’s Gang, it had never occurred to Harry to wonder where his mother was during all this, since he knew that she had been friends with all of them as well. “And then you thought it would be so funny to get me killed by Lupin...”

Sirius grimaced. "I've said I'm sorry about that. But James saved you, so--"

"So I lost Lily."

"Is that why? How did that work exactly? You almost died, so she didn't want to be with you any more?"

"I don't want to go into it now. Evidently, she had only been with me because Potter had been unable to say how he felt; he got over that and told her, and she left me for him. End of story." But Harry somehow got the impression there was just a little more to the story than that.

"I'm sorry to bring up the past, Severus," Sirius said quietly, sounding genuinely sorry. "Losing Lily--it must have devastated you--"

"It's not the past," Snape replied briskly, annoyed. "It's very much the present. It was after Lily that I--I was recruited. Without her, I didn't see any reason why not. And then when I learned about the prophecy, about Lily and Potter being targeted--I became a Ministry spy. But it was too late; I couldn't save her." Harry noticed that he didn't seem concerned about not saving his father. "The work I do now I do in honor of her memory. Why else do you think I would put up with you, Black?" Snape finished with a snarl that nonetheless seemed to have a slight smirk behind it. Maybe they're actually becoming friends, Harry thought. *That* would be strange.

Sirius laughed. "But why, then," he asked Snape, "do you give Harry such a hard time?"

"A hard time? Is that what he tells you? Someone around here has to do something other than coddle him, like McGonagall and Flitwick. It's to make him strong. To make him angry enough to want to do well just to *show* me." Harry was surprised; and even more so that it had worked. "Lily wouldn't have wanted me to be soft on him. You said yourself that he stood up to Voldemort. I understand he withstood the Imperious Curse and experienced the Cruciatus Curse twice. I also understand that he used the disarming charm he learned from me in dueling club several years ago..."

Sirius was smirking again. "You almost sound like you're taking a fatherly pride in Harry, Severus."

Snape sneered this away. "Potter would never give me credit for teaching him anything useful--or even for saving his life, which I've done more than once." Suddenly, there was a knocking at the door. Snape hissed at Sirius to leave, and Sirius' head disappeared from the fire almost instantaneously. Snape pointed his wand at the door saying, "*Alohomora!*" It leapt open.

Malfoy stood in the doorway. "Sorry to disturb you professor. I didn't bring all of my supplies with me, and we're running low on ladybugs for this potion. I don't suppose I could--borrow some? I'll replace them immediately. It's just that we have to add them in the next two minutes..." Snape waved at the shelves of jars next to the door.

"Take them, take them," he said distractedly, then moved his eyes to the doorway to look at Ginny, working in the classroom still.

Harry took this opportunity to slip back out the office door. Ginny was bent over her potions book, frowning, while the cauldron bubbled. He wondered what he should do about her and Malfoy. Ron would want to know, and George and Fred. On the other hand, if they killed Malfoy, they'd all wind up in Azkaban. Well, he thought, maybe we just need to wait to see what happens to the Malfoys; if they go to Azkaban, and it's partly because Lucius Malfoy was going after Ginny's family, they're not going to be friends for long.

Finally, after agonizing over what to do and watching Malfoy return with the ladybugs, Harry decided that they probably wouldn't be kissing again or anything else with Snape right there in his office. Harry crept to the door to leave.

He would just have to wait and see.

* * * * *

Hermione avoided Harry during the rest of Saturday; she wouldn't even look at him at dinner, and went up to her room right afterward, instead of lounging about the common room with everyone else, or even going to the library. Sunday morning, Harry hoped to talk with her about what had happened in the Charms classroom, but when he arrived in the common room to meet her for their morning run, Ginny was there. Harry stopped short, surprised, and a moment later, Hermione descended the stairs, dressed in her usual running clothes, but carrying a hooded sweat jacket, since it was getting colder now. Ginny also seemed to be dressed for running, in a sleeveless form-fitting ribbed top and very tight spandex pants. She also carried a hooded jacket and her red hair was corralled in a bun.

Harry didn't speak, waiting for one of them to say something. Harry was feeling just as awkward about seeing Ginny as he was about seeing Hermione, but she didn't seem to be the least bit awkward; then he realized that of course, she didn't know that he'd been in the Potions Dungeon and heard everything she'd said to Malfoy.

"Ginny asked to come today," Hermione offered as a brief explanation. "Well," Hermione said to Ginny, "we'd better warm up." She began showing Ginny the stretching exercises they were accustomed to doing, and Harry couldn't refrain from glancing surreptitiously at the two of them.

They both looked spectacular. He'd grown so accustomed to seeing Hermione, day in and day out, that he realized he hadn't really *seen* her. Having been kissing her the day before, he very much wanted to look at her now, memorize her. She had definitely acquired a classic hourglass figure, her running bra just barely being adequate to the job of keeping her chest still during exercise. And he--and Malfoy--had already noted how aesthetically pleasing the view of her walking away was.

Ginny, on the other hand, was about four inches taller than Hermione, willowy and lithe, her long legs emphasized by the stripe down the outside of her tights. Her curves were slighter than Hermione's, but undeniable. Her top seemed to be cut rather low--Harry tried not to look like he was staring while he did his own stretches. Something about her exposed neck was attracting his attention; he realized he just wasn't used to seeing it. It seemed very long...

Are they just doing this to torture me? he wondered, as he followed them out the portrait hole. No, he assumed it was just Hermione trying to avoid being alone with him. But it was torture, just the same, walking down the stairs behind them. Before they went outdoors they all put on their jackets, then went down to the Quidditch pitch. Next thing you know, Ginny'll be asking Malfoy to run with us, Harry thought. Like I need to see what *he* would wear to go running. Ginny kept up with them pretty well, but felt winded about two thirds of the way through their usually workout. She sat down on the grass and watched them finish, then they walked back up to the castle to do their warm-down exercises in the entrance hall. They all took off their jackets to do the stretching and sit-ups. Harry held Ginny's ankles while she did her sit-ups and Hermione stretched. Suddenly, Malfoy appeared at the top of the stairs that led up from the dungeons where Harry knew the Slytherin common room to be. Malfoy stopped abruptly when he saw Ginny, Harry and Hermione, looking at all three of them with a smirk, but his glance at Ginny also seemed to reveal some concern.

"Didn't think you'd go in for a *menage a trois*, Potter," he drawled. But despite his mocking tone, Harry could see where his eyes were straying: the neckline of Ginny's top, the long stripe

down the side of her tights. But then, however, he turned his attention to Hermione. “You know, Granger, I’m glad you were here this morning. It reminded me that I’d like to have lamb for dinner.”

Hermione was perplexed. “Lamb?”

“Yeah, you know. Rack of.” He looked pointedly at her running bra. And, grinning broadly, he turned and went into the Great Hall. Hermione colored and looked down at her rather generous chest, then put her jacket back on and mumbled that she needed to go shower (even though she hadn’t finished the warm-down). Ginny, on the other hand, was looking at Hermione in a less than friendly way. First they were mad at each other because of me, and now it’s because of Malfoy, thought Harry. *There’s* a disgusting development.

* * * * *

It seemed that Hermione was doing her best to assure that she was never alone with Harry. All during the rest of the day, she went to great lengths to assure that she was never alone, and therefore not open to being preyed upon by him. He felt like he’d been labeled as some kind of stalker, and wondered if this was how Sirius had felt when he’d first broken out of prison. It had been *Hermione* who had insisted on “tutoring” him for his meeting with Cho, he thought, feeling the injustice of it all.

Then, finally, she had no choice but to be alone with him. Since the Sunday night prefects’ meeting was running late, Alicia suggested to Roger that they continue without the fifth-year prefects, and instead send them back to their houses to check on the first and second years and make sure everything was under control. Alicia was very much a control freak, Harry decided; she seemed to assume that every time there was a prefects’ meeting, the other students were taking the opportunity to have wild parties or something. And yet, he remembered that she had been quite the party girl on Hermione’s birthday.

So he and Hermione were walking up to Gryffindor Tower alone, since the other houses were in very different directions. But when they reached the Charms corridor, he pulled her into the classroom again, where they’d been the day before, and without preamble, he pulled her to him and looked down at her. There was moonlight streaming in the windows, silvering her brow and cheeks. He wished he could see better what expression was in her eyes as he leaned down slowly and pressed his lips to hers. He had wanted to move slowly so that if she really wanted to, she would have had plenty of time to escape, to prevent it.

But that didn’t happen; instead, she immediately opened her mouth under his, entwining his tongue with hers, moaning in the back of her throat. Harry slid his fingers into her curls, holding her face up to his, feeling a warmth travel through his entire body that made him feel on fire. Her trembling fingers went from his face to his arms, then to the clasp of his robes, which were now gone, now to the buttons of his shirt, then to his chest, roaming over his sensitive skin, the changed torso she’d first noticed the morning after she’d arrived on Privet Drive, and he found her sitting on his bed. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder how long she’d sat there that morning, watching him sleep.

But then she broke the kiss and he felt her lips on his neck again, like the day before, then her tongue making an agonizing, wet trail down to his chest, as her fingers brushed lightly over his nipples. He felt like he needed to sit down, or fall down, or explode, or something. This was so--amazing. Why had she been avoiding him? She wasn’t pulling back now, she was taking the lead, if anything. What was with her?

He held her head as she turned her mouth to his right nipple, making him draw in his breath and

say her name.

“Hermione,” he breathed softly. “Hermione, why were you avoiding me all day?” His voice was still a whisper.

She brought her head up, no longer in contact with him in any way. She was crying, he saw.

Crying? Why? he wondered.

Then, without warning, she broke from him and ran for the door of the classroom, crying harder now. But Harry was too fast for her, reaching out and grabbing her wrist.

“Hermione,” he said more loudly now, and she shushed him.

“Harry,” she said in a thick voice, through her tears. “We can’t do this now. It’s too dangerous. Until the whole Viktor and Cho thing is over, we can’t risk it. If anyone caught us together...”

“We--we can be discreet,” he said, pulling her into his arms again. She raised her tear-streaked face to him in the moonlight.

“No, we can’t. *I* can’t. I--have no self-control when I’m alone with you. I--I want this too much--”

“And you always have to be in control, don’t you?”

She pushed him away angrily. “Don’t make fun of me. But, yes. I need to be in control of *myself*, and you--you make me feel anything but.”

His chest felt tight upon hearing this. *I make her feel out of control*, he thought. I do that. He felt happier than he ever remembered feeling during his entire life.

“I need your help in this, Harry,” she said softly. “If you don’t help me--I’m lost--”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “Of course...”

She separated herself from him again, but did not run; they stood not touching a mere three or four inches apart, but to Harry, it felt like a gulf a mile wide. “And sometimes,” she said,

“maybe sometimes, we can--be together. But we have to be careful. We can’t be thoughtless and careless. No one can know about us yet.”

Harry nodded, unable to speak, in case he said other things besides *Of course I’ll stay away from you, of course I’ll refrain from kissing you, touching you...*

She raised herself on tiptoe and put her hand on his bare chest; his shirt was still unbuttoned to the waist. “Don’t think this means I don’t want you,” she said even more softly, and quickly kissed him, her lips soft and moist and gone too soon. Hermione turned and left the classroom, no longer running, but purposeful. Harry stood there for a moment, in agony, remembering her hands, her lips and tongue...

He slowly buttoned his shirt and stooped to pick up his robes, then trod heavily up the stairs to the common room, having sentenced himself to hell.

* * * * *

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, they’d finished their discussions concerning *Lord of the Flies* and were supposed to start reading *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. On Friday, it was finally Ron’s turn to do his Othello presentation. Harry didn’t know what to expect, and neither did Hermione, since he’d refused to show it to either of them. The two of them had tried to keep Ron with them as much as possible all week, so they wouldn’t be tempted to go off alone. He went to the front of the classroom when Moody read his name, and while he started out reading in a monotone, he could not maintain his initial passive demeanor as he progressed through the essay:

“Rather than taking Othello’s character in an unnatural and opposite direction, his worst potential was realized and brought to the surface by Iago. This is not the same as

corrupting someone; if Othello had truly been corrupted by Iago, we should have gotten the impression that without his help, it would have been absolutely impossible for him ever to behave in such a judgmental and violent manner.

“It is Othello’s facade that Iago topples, rather than just his own at the end. Othello is not guiltless. Hate and love are very closely allied, and if he did not kill Desdemona out of hate, it was more out of love than honor (he claims he killed out of honor). More accurately, he killed Desdemona out of both love and hate. He killed emotionally, without thought for consequence or determining whether he was doing the right and just thing.

“He is no better than Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, who first tries to plant a seed of doubt in Othello by telling him, “She has deceived her father, and may thee.” Brabantio is like those fathers in fairy tales and myths who have such a deep love for their daughters that the idea of any other man loving them drives them crazy. They lock up their daughters in towers or dungeons, which are symbols of both the womb and tomb; it is a symbolic death. Brabantio boasts that Desdemona has repudiated all of the most eligible suitors in the city, but it could be that he has done this for her to keep her manless; since it would be a crime for him to have her, he is determined that no man will.

“This is why, when Desdemona confirms her allegiance to Othello in her father’s presence, he declares that she is dead to him (she has cheated, been unfaithful). He is not a violent man, like Othello, and so he kills her only symbolically.

“Othello is also determined that he should be the only man for Desdemona, and that she is better off dead if this is not true. He is as selfish as Brabantio in this. But Brabantio at least wants to hear from Desdemona’s own mouth what the truth is; he has enough faith in her to continue to believe she has been “faithful” until she herself disproves it. Othello may have been deceived, but he did not lack the means to determine who was telling the truth.

“We perhaps most readily believe what we most fear to. This is why Othello immediately credits Iago’s insinuations. The question of whether Othello acted honorably is most easily answered if we imagine that Desdemona was guilty of dallying with Cassio. Assuming that she did this, would we then blame Othello? Yes, we still would. Again, using the example of her father, he could have killed her symbolically by divorcing her, something that would have been within his rights if she had been unfaithful.

“But simply because Othello is guilty of acting without thought does not let Iago off the hook. He acts with full thought and premeditation when avenging his wife’s suspected infidelity, but cares as little as Othello to find out whether the accusations are grounded in any truth.

“Furthermore, Iago kills the most honorable man in the play, Roderigo, who is prepared to kill himself when he has lost Desdemona to Othello. Roderigo is not determined to kill her, to keep other men from her; he does not even attempt to kill Othello. Roderigo is guilty of nothing more than being lovesick and gullible; does no one serious harm and bears no one malicious thoughts. When Othello kills himself, at the end, doing what Roderigo only considered, he is finally acting honorably.”

The class clapped hands politely; Moody stomped his clawed wooden leg on the floor in lieu of applause. Ron sat down. Hermione looked at him strangely, and Harry started to reconsider

whether Ron would be dangerous to him and Hermione once he found out about them, or only to himself. Could Ron possibly be suicidal? Harry wondered. Then something else stuck in his brain: *She has deceived her father, and may thee*. She was deceiving Viktor Krum, and to a lesser degree, Ron (since he wasn't her boyfriend); could she ever deceive him, Harry? He tried to quickly suppress this thought, but now Moody was speaking.

He took Ron's parchment from the desk, where he'd left it, and read from it. "*We perhaps most readily believe what we most fear to.*"

He looked at the class, his normal eye narrowed and his magical eye seeming to be focused on the wall to his left. "We humans jump to conclusions. We make assumptions. And sometimes, we open ourselves to darkness by doing this. We aren't being infiltrated by it; we bring it out of ourselves, we let it rise to the surface, we stop *stopping* it."

He had been speaking very softly, but somehow, it now seemed like he was shouting, the room was so quiet. "Do you know what happens if someone is placed under the Imperious Curse, and then told to do something they wanted to do anyway? Something they were preventing themselves from doing, but something they wanted very much, nonetheless? That's when it becomes damn near impossible to fight the Imperious Curse. When it takes away your inhibitions. 'Inhibition' is a word that's gotten a bad reputation, when it's our inhibitions that help us to maintain a civilized society. What would happen if every time one of us had an impulse of any kind, we simply obeyed it? CHAOS! Just pure chaos would result!

"When someone under the Imperious Curse is told to do something against their nature, that's when it's easiest to fight it, because they stand a chance of being able to distinguish in their mind between their will and the will of the person who has cursed them. But if they are told to do something that is a deeply suppressed longing--TROUBLE."

With a jolt, Harry remembered Hermione describing her abduction in the marketplace in Bulgaria: *I suddenly felt all lightheaded and floaty....I tried fighting it, but there was nothing to fight, I wasn't being told to do anything I didn't want to do. I decided that I had an incredible urge to buy vegetables, but that's what I was already there for. I remember being very confused, like I was waiting for instructions, but they didn't come.* Had the instructions come from within herself? Harry wondered. Was it something against her nature they were urging her to do--or were they removing her inhibitions? Which inhibitions? he started to wonder, but then he immediately stopped wondering, and remembered her saying *I want this too much*. She was normally so in control, but now he made her feel out of control, she had said. Did *he* make her feel that way, or was it a curse? Would she have done any of what she had of her own volition, if she were fully able to govern her own actions, to decide which impulses to bury and which to give in to?

He was suddenly so full of doubts, it seemed that his head was spinning. He sat through the rest of the lesson in a fog, at the end hearing vaguely Moody growling to Ron, "Oh, and Weasley: twenty-five points for Gryffindor. Best damn essay I've gotten all term."

He saw Ron's ears go red as he tried to hide how pleased he was. Then, without warning, when they were out in the corridor, Ron stopped Harry and Hermione.

"Hey, you two. Wait a minute."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then Ron. Did Ron already suspect something?

"What's up with you two?" He turned to Hermione. "Ginny said you've been begging her to come running with you, when she hates getting up early." Aha, thought Harry. She told me Ginny *asked* to come. "And all week, at breakfast and in each class you've been trying to put

me in between you. Don't deny it, I can tell. Did you two fight or something? Because I hate when these things go on and on. Just kiss and make up already."

Harry winced. *It's just an expression*, he reminded himself. Just an expression.

"Well, to tell you the truth," Hermione was saying shakily, "we did have a disagreement. And-- it's not going to be solved anytime soon, so you'll just have to deal."

"What?" Ron said, not having gotten any real information.

"We've agreed to disagree," Harry said vaguely, before Ron could ask more questions. But this did not end it.

Ron leaned in closer to Harry and said quietly, "This isn't about being a Death Eater, is it?"

"No. I'm not going to become a Death Eater. I promise. Can we just go to Transfiguration now?"

Ron looked at the two of them, dissatisfied with their answers; he looked like he could tell they were hiding something. He turned without a word and strode away from them, his red hair like a flame lighting the corridor, his lanky six-foot-two frame moving easily, his slightly frayed robes billowing out behind him with a dignity Harry had never seen him muster before. He felt his stomach clench. *I'm lying to my best friend*. Then he looked at Hermione.

Is she under a spell?

He tried to shrug nonchalantly at her and turned to follow Ron.

We have to stay apart.

We have to stay apart.

* * * * *

Chapter Twelve

The Ram and the Dragon

As promised, Hagrid had brought snakes to their Care of Magical Creatures classes after the geese. Harry was disappointed though; they were about the same size as Sandy, and about as informative. They could all predict what was going to happen in the immediate vicinity in the next few minutes, but precious little else. As this usually consisted of who was going to speak, or sometimes what they were going to say, Harry disregarded it for the most part, but a couple of times he had a fun time making Draco Malfoy think he could read his mind. The look on Malfoy's face had been priceless, but Hermione was looking at him suspiciously again, and he stopped before she once more started asking about the Sight. Ron seemed to have forgotten about it after his leg healed, and had mercifully not brought it up again.

A week later, though, Harry was pleased to see a really large snake as they approached Hagrid's hut for class. They had moved on from very small snakes to very large; evidently, Hagrid did not believe in medium-sized snakes.

"Come on!" he said to them as they approached what appeared to be a large glass-walled room with no roof in what had been the goose-yard. "Professor Dumbledore made this for me to keep the boa constrictor in, so's it can't hurt no one."

Malfoy looked skeptically at the glass enclosure. "And we're supposed to learn about the care of this snake by looking at it through glass, hmm?" he drawled.

"Well--" Hagrid hemmed and hawed.

"Can I go in?" Harry asked. "You know--to talk with it?"

"Well--" Hagrid said again. Malfoy looked annoyed that Harry might seem to be braver than

him, volunteering to go into the enclosure with the boa constrictor. Harry assumed that Hagrid was reluctant because another thing Harry had done with the smaller snakes was ask them how they liked it at Hogwarts, and they'd all been unanimous that they hated it; it was too cold, they didn't like the food and the owls flying about gave them the willies. Harry had suggested to Hagrid that he change their diet and find a way to keep them warmer and also to shield them from the owls, and Hagrid had been rather annoyed about all of the extra work that this created for him. Now Hagrid seemed worried that Harry was going to find a way to make still more work for him to accommodate the whims of this snake. As much as he liked Harry, he didn't seem very happy to have a Parselmouth in the class.

"Please let him, Hagrid?" Hermione pleaded with Hagrid. "What if he finds out something really interesting?"

Hagrid grimaced; between the two of them he was hard pressed to refuse. "All right', all right'. Fer jes' a minute."

Harry looked over at Malfoy and gave him a smirk before going to the door, which Hagrid unlocked for him. He stepped in slowly, not wanting to alarm the snake. Harry remembered the very civilized conversation he'd had with a boa constrictor in the zoo when he was not quite eleven, before he knew he was a wizard. The snake had told him it had never been to Brazil. Then Harry had unintentionally made the glass disappear that confined the snake, and it had seen his cousin Dudley. Dudley looked like lunch. Harry had tried many times since then *not* to wish that Dudley *had* been the boa's lunch that day, but it was sometimes difficult. Harry realized that he hadn't had that thought for some time, now that he and Dudley had become friends--and then he remembered that he was going to write to Dudley at school, and he'd been at school for seven weeks without once writing to him. He should do that later.

But right now, he wanted to pay close attention to the snake. When he entered the glass enclosure, it lifted its head and looked at him, expressionless, and Harry tried not to think how much it looked like Voldemort. He was aware of the Slytherins and the other Gryffindors watching through the glass. His heart began to thump very loudly in his chest; he realized that he'd never actually been near a snake this large before, other than Voldemort's snake; it was even bigger than the one Malfoy had conjured during the dueling club in second year (although, come to think of it, Snape had whispered something in Malfoy's ear right before he'd conjured the snake...). Harry shook his head. He needed to concentrate.

"Hello," he hissed at the snake. It still gazed fixedly at him. "My name is Harry Potter. Do you have a name?"

"What is a name?" the snake hissed back, uncoiling and advancing across the enclosure toward him.

Great, thought Harry. I have to explain this again. He'd already explained it to all of the other snakes Hagrid had brought to class. It was getting a bit old.

"Never mind. Listen, I have a snake who's a friend of mine, and she told me that snakes have the Sight. Have you had any glimpses of the future?"

The snake stopped moving toward him, for which Harry was grateful. It looked like it might be thinking. "Many will go, but few will stay," it hissed.

"Many will go, but few will stay," Harry whispered to himself. What did it mean? And how far into the future could a snake this size See? He asked it.

"Moons..." it hissed as though sleepy. Harry decided that it must mean months.

"How many moons?" he wanted to know.

But it merely said, “Moons...” again, over and over. Well, thought Harry, that must mean more than one. So, a minimum of two months. Then he asked it about how it liked Hogwarts, as he had done with the other snakes. He’d done this so that he could tell Hagrid and the others something that had been said; he still wasn’t interested in divulging that snakes had the Sight. He preferred it to remain his secret.

He stepped out of the enclosure when Hagrid had unlocked it again and informed Hagrid of what the snake said it wanted to eat. When they were on their way to Herbology afterward, Hagrid called after them, “And exactly *where*, Harry, am I supposed to get an *ocelot*?”

* * * * *

Harry tried to ask the boa about the future again on Thursday when they once more had Care of Magical Creatures. This snake seemed to be a little more informative than the smaller ones, but he would have liked knowing how many months into the future it was seeing, and what it meant by *Many will go, but few will stay*. The second time he tried getting something out of the snake it gave him a different prophecy.

“The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.”

Harry repeated what it had said, and wrote it on all of his notes in every class he had for the rest of the day. What did the things mean that the snake had said? he wondered. He could hope that perhaps the first prediction meant that Hagrid’s mother’s friends would come initially, but most of them would go. Then he realized that their going might mean their joining Voldemort—okay, so he *didn’t* hope that. This was confusing. Snake predictions were so strange and vague.

Some Sight, Harry thought. They all needed spectacles for their Inner Eye, he decided.

Ginny had stopped coming running with him and Hermione in the morning. It was getting colder as Halloween approached, and they had taken to doing their running around the large Great Hall early on, before breakfast. They didn’t really talk at that time, and when they were with Ron (which they were at all other times) they tried to be normal with each other, but Harry could tell that Ron still was on edge about their friendship being so changed.

Harry had been doing extra work on potions, as he’d said he would, and when he did, he frequently encountered Draco Malfoy and Ginny there, and sometimes Neville, too. He tried to keep an eye on Malfoy and Ginny without making it seem that that was what he was doing.

Their interaction (when he was around, anyway) seemed fairly innocuous, but he was still suspicious of what might go on when no one else was in the dungeon. He tried to ask Colin Creevey about Ginny, in an oblique way, so he wouldn’t get suspicious. He learned that Ginny was always with the other fourth years, when she wasn’t in the common room or the potions dungeon. There didn’t seem to be any times when her whereabouts were unaccounted for, times when she could possibly be meeting Draco Malfoy on the sly. Harry hoped Colin was right. He dreaded something happening between her and Malfoy, and then Ron finding out that Harry had known something. He’d be liable to kill Harry first before going after Malfoy...

On Saturday he and Hermione would be having another date in Hogsmeade with Viktor Krum and Cho Chang. He had also had to make time to spend with Cho Chang, walking through the corridors holding her hand, as he’d seen her doing with Cedric the previous year, or, a few times, meeting down at the greenhouses to kiss a little. He tried to cut these sessions short as much as possible, feeling guilty for several reasons all at once: he didn’t want to lead Cho on any more than absolutely necessary; he felt (although she had pushed him into it) that he was being unfaithful to Hermione; and, sometimes, he found himself actually enjoying it a little, making him think of what Ginny had said. I’ll be glad when this is over, he thought repeatedly.

They were going to an opera performance in the village on Saturday. Viktor had gotten tickets to a matinee of *Dido and Aeneas*, performed by a company of witches and wizards that were evidently world famous. It was a traveling production. Hermione informed him excitedly that there were witches and wizards in it (characters), and that he needn't worry about not being able to understand, although it was an opera. It was written in English.

She told Harry some more about it while he and Ron played chess in the common room. "It's got some really beautiful arias and choruses. When Queen Dido sings her death aria..."

"Hermione!" Harry groaned. "You've just told me that one of the title characters dies."

Ron shrugged. "It's an opera. Probably everybody dies."

"No," said Harry, thinking of the essay he'd written for Moody. "That's Hamlet. In operas, I thought it was just the people you like best who die. To punish you for going."

Hermione scowled. "I saw a really amazing production of *Aida* in Greece last summer..."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Just when we thought you couldn't get nerdier. Prefect *and* opera buff..." but he stopped short when he saw the hurt look on Hermione's face and made a hasty move that resulted in Harry taking his bishop (Harry's knight clubbed the bishop on the head and dragged him off the board).

Before class on Wednesday Harry had sent a letter to Dudley by owl post, and when he went upstairs to the common room after classes were done for the week on Friday, Hedwig was waiting for him with a reply.

Dear Harry,

Thanks for writing. But next time, send Hedwig at night. I'll keep my window open. My roommate doesn't mind. Hedwig showed up in the middle of my biology class. We were getting these white mice to run through this big cardboard maze and seeing whose mouse would get to the cheese in the middle first. Mine was pretty lame. Then when Hedwig came flying in, she thought it was a buffet or something. All those mice! You should have heard the screaming and seen the blood flying. She was cool, man! I acted like the big owl-expert and led her out of the lab. The professor never noticed she had a letter attached to her leg. I took her up to my room and gave her another mouse I nicked on the way out. She seemed pretty happy.

How's Hermione? When's she going to write? I included a letter for her too. DON'T OPEN IT! I'm still running. I've started lifting weights, too. Everything's okay, but I think my roommate's stealing from me. I haven't caught him yet, though.

Tell Hermione to write to me!

--Dudley

Harry gave Hermione her letter while Ron frowned and tried to read over her shoulder. She held it against her chest, not letting him. Ron went off in a huff, and Harry asked her what was the big deal. She laughed.

"Nothing. I'm just trying to wind him up."

Harry looked at Ron's retreating back. "It's working." What, he wondered, would have happened if Ron had caught them in the Charms classroom--either time? Then he decided he didn't want to think about that after all. He remembered when Ron wouldn't talk to him, almost exactly a year ago, after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Ron had refused to believe that Harry hadn't put his own name in until after the first task, when he had flown on his broom to get past the Hungarian Horntail, the most fearsome of the four dragons selected for the champions to face. He didn't want to lose his best friend again. Maybe Ron was the one

they should be fixing up--but then he remembered what a disaster it had been to fix him up with Padma Patil for the Yule Ball. All Ron had noticed that night was Hermione. Hermione with Viktor Krum. Hermione looking more beautiful than she'd ever looked before. And although Harry knew this, at the time he had taken merely an academic interest in it; his main focus had been Cho Chang, much to Parvati's chagrin. He was glad he had finally apologized to her. Harry wrote another letter to Dudley, asking Hermione whether she wanted to send a letter of her own along with it.

"Sure. I've got some Arithmancy to do, but I can write a short note to Dudley first. Sounds like Hedwig made quite a splash in his biology class." Harry smiled and agreed. Then he realized he'd been looking fixedly at her for a full minute, and looked away, reddening. He glanced back at her, seeing a rosy glow on her cheeks as well, as she dug in her bag for a blank piece of parchment. He knew he'd been thinking about those two times in the Charms classroom; he she been thinking about that, too? he wondered.

After dinner, the common room emptied out a little at a time. Finally, only Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione and the twins were still in the room. The twins were discussing future plans for the half of the Triwizard Tournament money their dad had invested for them. Ron and Ginny were playing chess, with Harry watching. She was the only one he'd ever seen beat Ron at chess, and he was determined to figure out how she was doing it. He watched her as she played, her glowing hair falling in her face at times, which she pushed impatiently behind her ears. A determined look was in her deep brown eyes, two little lines forming between her brows when she was frowning, deep in thought. After a while, Harry forgot he was trying to discern her chess strategy, he was so fascinated by looking at her. But then she looked up and caught his eye. She got an angry scowl on her face, her lips went into a straight line. Harry looked back at the board. Why should she be mad at him for looking at her? he thought. He didn't dare look up at her again for a while.

Hermione had a sudden thought, and looked up from her Arithmancy work. "Harry! Look at the time. Weren't you going to send that letter to Dudley?"

He walked over to where she was working. "Yeah, but I thought I'd do it later. I can just use the Invisibility Cloak to avoid being caught by Filch. I don't want Hedwig showing up at Smeltings again when there are a lot of people awake to see her."

She nodded. "Good idea."

Just then, Ginny cried, "Checkmate! Good try, Ron. Better luck next time."

Ron stared at the board. "But how--what--?"

Ginny pointed. "Your king is stuck, see? If he stays there, my rook gets him, and if he moves to any of the spaces around him, he's caught by my queen, bishops or knights. And your lot can't get any of mine." Ron still stared, dumbfounded. Harry wished he'd seen the last few moves she'd made to accomplish this rout. She just amazed him more every day.

Ron began putting the chess pieces away, then failed to stifle a huge yawn. "I think I'd better get upstairs before I fall asleep on the chess board and wake up with angry pawns stuck to my face." Ginny said goodnight to them all and went up the stairs. She gave Harry a funny look just before disappearing. What was that? Harry thought. Had she gone completely in the opposite direction, from having a crush on him to hating him? Had Draco Malfoy poisoned her mind against him?

The twins and Ron both went up the stairs, and Harry followed them, saying good night to Hermione, still bent over her work.

“Good night,” she said distractedly, not looking at him. He went up to his dormitory and changed into his pajama pants and laid down on top of his covers, pulling the curtains closed around him. As he waited for the time to pass, he fingered the basilisk amulet resting on his bare chest, wondering what exactly he would do if Ginny turned against him and her whole family and...became Dark. It gave him a dreadful, empty feeling in his chest, like when he first saw Cedric after he was killed, feeling responsible, feeling helpless and alone...

Finally, Harry felt it was late enough. He had dozed off for a little while, then jerked himself awake, continuing to wait. He heard Neville snoring, and Ron mumbling in his sleep. Seamus and Dean were pretty quiet sleepers, but he thought he heard rustling as one of them turned over in bed. He opened his bedcurtains and went to his trunk, removing his invisibility cloak. He put on his dressing gown and tied the belt, carrying the cloak under his arm and remembering to slip his wand into his pocket, as a safety measure. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he was momentarily taken aback; there was someone in an armchair near the fire.

“Took you long enough, Harry,” Hermione said, peering around the wing of the chair, smiling. He sighed with relief. She stood. “How exactly were you going to mail your letter and mine when I’ve got both of them still?” she said, not making fun of him exactly, but coming pretty close, Harry felt. But then she smiled again, and Harry had to smile too. She was dressed for bed, in a knee-length night shirt that buttoned down the front and a pink chenille dressing gown and matching fuzzy slippers. He had simply slipped his feet into his sneakers without socks, not owning a pair of slippers. The Dursleys thought of such things as frills (as far as he was concerned, not for themselves) and he frankly hadn’t thought of purchasing such things when he’d actually had a few pounds for doing the landscaping.

“I supposed you want to come along,” he said lightly.

“Well, it has been a while since we’ve been skulking around in the middle of the night. And now that we’re prefects, we could claim to be patrolling or something.”

“Yes, patrolling without being asked, and wearing an Invisibility Cloak. That’s really plausible.” She walked toward the portrait hole, laughing. “Come on. Before I lose my nerve.” They climbed out and closed the portrait, then put the cloak over themselves. They walked closely together up to the Owlery, Harry trying not to think about how they’d been avoiding being alone. They’d gone around together under the cloak loads of times in the past, and for reasons that were far more dangerous than mailing a couple of letters. But now they’d had the Charms classroom encounters....

They reached the Owlery without incident. Harry took the cloak off the two of them and tied the letters to Hedwig’s leg and sent her on her way. He remembered when he had been there with Ginny, sending the note to Cho, how Ginny had tried to imply that she was over him and had then been crying on Draco Malfoy’s chest because she’d seen him kissing Cho Chang. He turned from the window to smile at Hermione, somehow feeling that in some ways, she was one of the least complicated parts of his life right now. He felt happy when he was with her, and she seemed to feel the same; he didn’t know what he felt about Ginny, or she about him, and he knew unequivocally that he didn’t feel anything for Cho. He knew that in some ways the *most* complicated thing he could do to his life was to be with Hermione, but he tried not to think about Ron and Viktor Krum and Voldemort.

They put the cloak back on to go downstairs. This time, Harry put his right arm around her shoulder to bring her closer to him and, not looking at him, she put her left arm around his waist. Then, they turned a corner and saw--Mrs. Norris. She walked right toward them, her eyes

glowing as if she could see them (Harry had yet to determine whether Mrs. Norris could see through Invisibility Cloaks, like Mad Eye Moody). They pressed themselves against a wall and watched her pass, and before she was past them completely, she turned her head and seemed to look directly at them. They started to move again after she was gone around a corner, when, to their horror, Filch appeared at the end of the corridor. He was brandishing a mop, looking as though he was in fact trying to ferret out people wearing Invisibility Cloaks, swinging it around in the corridor wildly. Harry's heart was thudding in his chest so hard that it hurt. If he kept that up, when he reached them the mop would definitely make contact with them. On the other hand, Harry was afraid that moving away from Filch down the corridor would produce noise. He turned and looked down at Hermione, in case she had any brilliant suggestions for what to do now.

Suddenly there was a noise of a suit of armor crashing, most likely falling to bits from the sound of the racket. Filch whirled, brandishing the mop in front of him. He went running, presumably in the direction of the armor-noise. Harry heaved a sigh of relief. He and Hermione were able to proceed to the portrait-hole without further incident.

Once in the common room again, Hermione flopped back in the armchair by the fire where he'd found her. She put her hand over her heart, trying to get her breath. "Harry," she said slowly, "I'm think I'm getting too old for this..."

Harry laughed, sitting on the hearthrug and leaning against the front of her chair. Her legs were beside his shoulder. She kicked off her slippers and held her bare feet out to the fire, warming them. It was getting a bit drafty in the castle to be walking about without socks on at night. He turned and looked, thinking, *Even her feet are pretty*. He reached out without thought and touched her foot with his hand, stroking the top, forgetting it was attached to her, simply following the line with his finger, up to her ankle and back to her toes. But Hermione was not able to behave as though it wasn't attached to her; she shuddered and leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes and sighing. Harry looked up at her, then decided, *Okay, she likes that*. He used both his hands now, caressing and stroking her feet, while she gripped the arms of the chair and sighed again, her eyes still closed. He smiled. He was driving her crazy and loving every minute of it. She had very sensitive feet...

Then she started moving. She stood up and then took a step forward, sitting down on the floor in the front of the chair, next to him, also leaning against the chair. Harry put his arm around her shoulder again, and she leaned her head on his shoulder, his cheek on the top of her head. At first, he didn't notice her hand on his leg, tracing lazy circles, then he became acutely aware of it, wishing that she would stop and that she would never stop. He thought he was going insane (clearly she thought it was her turn to drive him crazy). He lifted his head and looked down at her, finding her looking up at him. He remembered being in the garden when Sirius had come, their mouths moving closer and closer, and then Sandy speaking...but this time, Sandy said nothing, wrapped around his arm under his dressing gown, and their lips touched briefly, tentatively, before Harry spasmodically clutched at her and held her face up to his, and she pulled him to her, her fingers entwined in his hair, both of them forgetting any reason not to do this, any reason to show restraint.

Harry broke the kiss, but only to move his mouth down her neck, to duck under her chin and run his tongue down her throat, to hear that moaning sound again she'd made in the Charms classroom. Her hand went to the belt of his dressing gown, he felt her hands on his chest, then her lips, tracing a moist trail down to his stomach, making his abdominal muscles flinch. He

gasped at the sensation, then brought her face up to his again, holding her tightly, desperately. His fingers deftly undid the buttons down the front of her nightshirt, her hand went to the drawstring on his pajama pants. Harry felt he was drowning in her, and didn't want to be saved, couldn't imagine anything more wonderful in the world than to sink down into this whirlpool called Hermione...

"A ram will meet a dragon," said Sandy suddenly. Damn! Harry thought. He was seriously reconsidering the wisdom of having a snake. Harry raised his head and listened; Hermione didn't notice at first, kissing his shoulder, caressing the sensitive skin on his back. What could Sandy mean? he wondered. Who was going to meet whom? But he did know one thing; whatever was going to happen, it was going to be in the immediate vicinity, and if they weren't careful, they would be caught. She finally noticed that he was no longer touching or kissing her; she looked at him, perplexed. He seemed to be listening intently to the large empty room around them.

"Harry? What's wrong?"

He swallowed and looked at her. She was so beautiful in the firelight, her cheeks flushed and her curls askew. "Button your shirt and tie your dressing gown. We need to get into separate chairs. Someone's coming." He rose and put his dressing gown on his shoulders again and seated himself in a chair a couple of feet away from the one she'd been sitting in. She frowned, looking as she had in the garden on Privet Drive again. She buttoned up her nightshirt (Harry's hands had been inside it; he tried not to think about it, with a shiver). Then she tied her dressing gown belt and put her slippers on again, sitting in the chair with her legs drawn up once more. Harry hadn't bothered to tie his dressing gown; he was very warm, and Hermione looked at him, at his bare chest with the basilisk amulet showing, and he thought she made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat.

"Are you going to explain this to me or not, Harry Potter?" *Uh oh*, he thought. *I'm in trouble. Full name.*

"Like I said. Someone's coming."

She opened her mouth to say something--probably about him having the Sight, he thought--when Ginny appeared at the bottom of the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories. She stopped short at seeing Harry and Hermione sitting in the armchairs by the fire.

"Ginny!" Hermione said, surprised. Harry was too, but then he thought about it. He remembered George and Fred talking about her birthday being April first; that made her an Aries, the sign of the ram. Sandy had called Parvati a fish because she was a Pisces...But there wasn't any sign of the zodiac that had a dragon for a symbol...

Harry opened his eyes wide. *Dragon*. He knew who it was. He scrambled to his feet, his dressing gown swinging. "Hermione! Take Ginny back upstairs! Now!"

Hermione furrowed her brow and rose, too slowly for Harry's taste, but he bit his tongue to keep from barking at her, to keep from telling her to get a move on. Ginny protested.

"What? I don't have to--"

"Yes you do," Harry said sternly. "We're prefects. You have to listen to us. Go. I'll talk to him."

Hermione swung her head around. "Talk to who?"

Ginny widened her eyes, panicked that Harry would say. He shook his head at her to reassure her. "Nevermind. Just take her. Go. And make sure she can't get downstairs until morning. Use whatever binding spell you have to, I don't care. Do what you did to Peeves..."

“Harry, you know I can’t--”

“Just get her out of here!” he finally lost it. Both girls looked at him strangely. Ginny set her jaw defiantly as Hermione grabbed her arm and dragged her back up the stairs with her. When he heard doors closing up in the girls’ dorms, he went over to the portrait hole and opened it, knowing who he would see waiting in the corridor.

It was Draco Malfoy.

“Potter!”

“Malfoy,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice even, to not let rage make his voice shake. “Get in here *now*, before Filch comes by.”

At the mention of Filch, he scrambled in and Harry closed the portrait again.

“What’s going on?” Malfoy demanded to know.

“You’ve got some nerve, Malfoy. I should be asking you that. I had Hermione take Ginny back up to her room. You’re not meeting her tonight, or any night. Are you out of your mind? Are you trying to get her in trouble?” Harry stopped, wishing he hadn’t used that turn of phrase.

“We were just going to go someplace to talk. We never get to be alone to talk. Whenever we’re in the Potions Dungeon either you or Longbottom or both are there. We haven’t been able to talk alone in a couple of weeks.”

“Why do you need to talk to her alone?” Harry wanted to know. He felt incredibly close to committing murder.

“I don’t *need* to--well, okay, maybe I do--I--I *want* to--” he trailed off. He frowned at Harry.

“You’re not one of her brothers.”

“No, and you should thank your lucky stars for that, because any one of them would be happy to pull your intestines out through your ears right now. And that’s without knowing that you were planning to sneak around with Ginny in the middle of the night.”

Malfoy’s jaw was set. “Listen, I know that my family and Ginny’s family have bad blood between them, but I would never do anything to hurt her. I--look, I don’t exactly feel comfortable talking to you of all people about how I feel about Ginny. Do you think I planned this? A Weasley? Don’t you think I tried to talk myself out of this? But--” and he looked up at the ceiling, his mouth in a line.

“You don’t have to tell me that Ginny’s a great girl. I know that. She may not think I know, but I do,” Harry said, remembering Malfoy telling her that Harry wasn’t worth her obsessing over since he’d ignored her for three years. “But if you’ve got some romantic notion about the two of you being Romeo and Juliet, get rid of it right now. Romeo and Juliet had it easy compared to you two, and look what happened to *them*.” Malfoy grimaced, silently acknowledging that Harry was right (but not willing to say so). “This isn’t the time or place to discuss it. I want you to promise me that you’ll be content with seeing her in the Potions Dungeon for now. Promise?”

Malfoy mumbled a reluctant affirmative. “Good. Now wait here. I have to go get something.”

Malfoy frowned but stayed where he was. Harry ran up the stairs to his dorm and then reappeared in a moment with a piece of parchment. He put it on a table, and when Malfoy started to approach him, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at him. “Back off, Malfoy. Stay over there. You don’t need to see this. In fact, turn around.” Malfoy stood his ground and they glared at each other. Harry was not going to look away first. Finally, Malfoy grimaced again and turned his back to Harry. Harry waved his wand over the parchment.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

The map of Hogwarts appeared on the parchment, and Harry was quickly able to locate the

dots in the Gryffindor common room with the minuscule labels *Harry Potter* and *Draco Malfoy*. There were also some tiny dots in the Trophy Room labeled *Ernest MacMillan* and *Hannah Abbott*. Harry grinned; *All right, Ernie and Hannah!* But then he thought of Hermione and shook himself. There; he'd found what he was looking for. In the entrance hall was a dot labeled *Argus Filch*. He waved his wand over the parchment again, saying, "Mischief managed," and rolled it up and put it in the pocket of his dressing gown. He walked back over to Malfoy.

"Here's the thing," he said. "When you're going back, avoid the entrance hall. That's where Filch is. And also, don't go in the Trophy Room; you might, ah, disturb some people there..." "How do you know?" Malfoy said suspiciously.

"I just do. I know you don't want to trust me, but you don't have a choice." They glared at each other again, then Malfoy actually let out a laugh.

"If anyone had told me that I'd ever be standing here talking to you in the middle of the night...All right. Avoid the entrance hall. I almost got caught by Filch once tonight. I totaled a suit of armor on the third floor and I heard him come running..."

Harry laughed now. "That was you? I should thank you. Filch had almost walked right into me and Hermione coming back from mailing a couple of letters to my cousin. That collapsing armor created just the diversion we needed."

Malfoy's eyebrows shot up. "Granger? So there is something between you two? Wait--you said that she took Ginny back up to her dorm. You two were down here, weren't you? When Ginny came downstairs." He eyed Harry shrewdly. "Ruined your night, did I?" He looked down at Harry's pajama pants. "Your pants are untied. Did you do it or did she? And did she give you this?" He reached out and picked up the basilisk from Harry's chest. Harry knocked his hand away.

"As a matter of fact, that was a birthday gift from Ginny." He challenged Malfoy with his eyes to say anything about that. "I think you should leave now before Filch moves on to another part of the castle," he said evenly, making a great effort to remain in control. But Malfoy wasn't done.

"You're being so self-righteous, so high and mighty about me and Ginny, and here you are with Granger on the hearthrug in the middle of the night..."

Harry couldn't take it any longer; he pushed Malfoy up against the wall and spoke with his mouth very close to his face. "*Nothing happened. You don't know anything.*"

Malfoy pushed him off. "Harry Potter, hypocrite. Some things never change, do they? Nothing happened because Ginny and I interrupted you, and that's probably the only reason. I can't believe you..."

"This is different," Harry hissed. "And you have to remember: Ginny's a year younger than us. You--you have to have self-control--" Harry couldn't go on. He was shaking. The thought of Malfoy and Ginny doing anything remotely similar to what he and Hermione had been doing was making him feel ill.

To his surprise, Malfoy nodded. "I know that. I would never...you may not believe me, but she *is* safe with me. Really." Harry looked at him, never remembering Malfoy sounding so straightforward and sincere.

"All right. Like I said, this isn't the time or place. You'd better go. Avoid the entrance hall."

"Right," Malfoy said, opening the portrait and climbing through the hole. "But not because of Filch. He's a pussycat compared to Snape."

“Snape? Are you kidding? As far as he’s concerned, no one in his house can do anything wrong.”

“Hmph. That’s only how he acts around students from other houses. If any of us gets points taken from our house...You don’t want to know. And *he’s* a pussycat compared to my dad.”

“Now *that* I believe,” Harry said, shuddering.

“Yeah. I’m glad Moody’s planning to teach us how to cope with the Cruciatius Curse. Then maybe when I upset my dad, he won’t know I can’t feel what he’s doing...”

Harry dropped his jaw. “Your dad put the Cruciatius Curse on you?”

“No, you idiot. But there are plenty of legal curses that are still--extremely painful.” He had been looking at Harry, but now looked away; he’d said too much. He decided to change the subject. “So; how far’d you get with Granger?”

“Don’t push it, Malfoy. I’m not talking to you about Hermione. Do you want me to get all of Ginny’s brothers down here? Plus, there’s plenty of other guys in Gryffindor who be pleased to scalp you for what you’re thinking about Ginny--I didn’t say actually doing, just thinking. And if you deny that you’ve thought stuff, you must really think I’m stupid.”

Malfoy grinned. “Nah. That one’s too easy. I’m not even gonna touch it. Like candy from a baby.” He turned before closing the portrait. “So; we each have a secret the other one knows about.”

“Looks that way.”

“Well, Potter, I have to admit...Granger. I don’t exactly blame you.”

Now Harry had to really restrain himself from hitting Malfoy. It took all the effort he could muster.

“And Ginny,” said Harry softly. “I don’t blame you, either.”

Malfoy nodded and closed the portrait; no goodnight, thanks, or anything else. Harry heard his retreating footsteps, then went over to sit in an armchair near the fire again. He looked at the lion on the keystone. In the flickering light it almost seemed to be moving. He closed his eyes and remembered being with Hermione again, by the fire...But that wasn’t helping his peace of mind a bit. He fingered the basilisk amulet as he walked up the stairs to his dorm.

* * * * *

Chapter Thirteen

Cats and More Cats

The next day, they went to the opera in Hogsmeade. Harry had never been to the large timbered hall on the High Street that was used for everything from town meetings and amateur theatrical productions to weddings and funerals. He had the opportunity to see a greater cross-section of Hogsmeade residents than he was usually privy to; there were many people there who he was sure would never set foot in Honeyduke’s or Zonko’s.

Dumbledore was there, to Harry’s surprise. Great; how was Ron going to claim that Dumbledore wanted to see them as soon as they got back if he was going to the same opera? Why was he there anyway?

While the chamber orchestra was tuning up, Dumbledore caught his eye and came over.

“Harry! And Miss Granger and Miss Chang. Ah, Mr. Krum! Fancy meeting you here. I understand you’re working in England now.” Viktor grunted. Dumbledore turned back to Harry. “I didn’t know you liked chamber operas, Harry. Purcell’s my personal favorite, of

course--have you heard the Indian Queen?--although I also like Monteverdi, but when most people think of opera, they go in for the big splashy stuff, you know, Puccini, Verdi, Wagner.” And then Harry remembered the Albus Dumbledore Famous Witches and Wizards Card he’d gotten on his very first trip on the Hogwarts Express; in addition to listing Dumbledore’s many accomplishments, it had included the information that Dumbledore enjoyed chamber music and tenpin bowling. Harry wondered fleetingly if there was a magical bowling alley in Hogsmeade, or whether perhaps Dumbledore contented himself with going to Muggle alleys.

“Viktor got us tickets, Headmaster,” Hermione informed him. “He gets a lot of perks for playing for the Chuddly Cannons.”

“Ah! The Cannons! Yes, yes, fine team. Not the Puddlemere United, in my opinion, but then...Well, I shan’t keep you,” he said, eyes twinkling behind his spectacles, as he made his way back to his seat. He appeared to be attending the opera alone. As the lights went down in the hall and the orchestra began the overture, Harry looked sideways at Cho. She looked back; he turned back to the front. He hoped she didn’t expect him to kiss her at the opera, as though they’d gone to see a Muggle film. He especially had no intention of doing anything of the sort with Hermione around, let alone Dumbledore. He felt her hand on his, and he laced his fingers through hers; she’d have to be satisfied with that, he thought. Viktor was sitting to Cho’s right; he had put his arm around Hermione and she leaned against his shoulder comfortably. Harry tried not to seethe, but it was difficult keeping his temper. Thankfully, the overture was over and the singing began.

He hadn’t had time to consult the program notes and was surprised to learn that it was about Aeneas dallying with the queen of Carthage on the way back from the Trojan War, before going off to found Rome, thus breaking her heart. He felt, frankly, that the witches were somewhat superfluous, serving merely as an excuse for Aeneas’ behavior. He was following his destiny, according to other parts of the plot. Well, which was it? Harry thought irritably. He thought again of Ron’s Othello report....*we should have gotten the impression that...it would have been absolutely impossible for him ever to behave in such a judgmental and violent manner....*

It was in his nature. Harry thought about it. But--how does a person really know what’s in their nature when they’re fifteen, when they’re still getting to know themselves? He looked at Cho out of the corner of his eye. A year ago, he could not have imagined being in the situation he was in now. As he listened to the beautiful singing, he wondered how they were ever going to get their plan to really work...

In our deep vaulted cell (-ed cell)

The charm we’ll prepare (prepare)

Too dreadful a practice (Too dreadful a practice)

Too dreadful

(Too dreadful)

A practice

(A practice)

For this open air

(For this open air)

Every other phrase was sung very softly, as though the previous musical passage were echoing down a long cavern. The singers playing the witches retreated to the back of the stage, where they supposedly were going to brew something that would be the undoing of Queen Dido. He

assumed that Purcell had not had much contact with magical people, if any, to depict them the way he did. He looked over at Dumbledore; he seemed to be enjoying himself, and he'd said that Purcell was his favorite. Well, thought Harry, if it was good enough for Dumbledore... The singer playing Dido was a tall, beautiful witch with long dark red hair. Each note she sang rang with a crystalline clarity, like a bell. At the end, after she sang her death aria (Hermione was right; it was quite beautiful), she lay on the stage, her head resting on her arm while her retinue sang a haunting dirge over her and scattered rose petals on and around her.

...And scatter roses,

Scatter roses on her tomb.

Soft, soft and gentle.

Soft, soft and gentle as her heart.

It was really very touching, but suddenly, as he sat watching the beautiful woman with dark red hair who'd just been singing so heartbreakingly, he felt his eyes begin to water. Mum! he suddenly thought. He'd never felt quite like this before; the wave of emotion was unstoppable; it rose up out of him like a tidal wave, and he disconnected his hand from Cho's, choking out the words, "Excuse me. I'll be back."

He edged his way out, blindly finding the aisle and hurrying down it to the large anteroom that served as a kind of lobby. He wasn't aware at first of there being anyone else there. Then he turned and saw Hermione; she'd followed him, leaving Cho and Viktor alone together. She didn't say a word. She simply walked toward him and put her arms around him. He pillowed his cheek on her head. He had actually stopped crying already, but he needed to hold her. He thought of being in the common room with her the night before, and shuddered. Even if they managed to get Viktor and Cho together, could they really be open about being a couple? Did they dare tell Ron? What if Voldemort and the Death Eaters found out? Then he groaned inwardly; Draco Malfoy knew. He was practically in training to be a Death Eater, if he went by what Sirius had said to Snape when Harry had overheard their conversation in Snape's office. Harry tried to blank his mind, simply *be*; he held Hermione and watched over her head while the members of the opera company took their bows. They separated and Harry tried to compose himself as the crowd slowly seeped out of the hall, put on cloaks and prepared to return to the brisk autumn day. No other Hogwarts students appeared to have had tickets to the performance. Dumbledore did not see them in the crowd as he left. Good, Harry thought. Hopefully he'll be back at the castle before us. He checked his watch; it was only three o'clock. They didn't have to be back for two hours. Even one hour should give Dumbledore enough of a lead.

The hall was empty now except for Viktor and Cho and the orchestra members still packing up their music and instruments, waving their wands to make their gear leap into their cases. Then Harry stared; Cho and Viktor were having an animated conversation. Viktor was *laughing*! He turned to Hermione, excited.

"They're talking!" he grinned, hardly daring to believe that the plan might be working. Hermione looked. Now Cho was laughing, putting her hand on Viktor's arm. She was more alive looking than Harry had seen her since before Diggory died. But now Hermione stopped looking cheerful about it.

"Hmph!" she said, her arms crossed. "Figures. I knew she'd be the sort of person who'd try to steal another girl's boyfriend."

Harry looked at her, his brow furrowed. He wished he could worm out of her what had

happened between her and Viktor in Bulgaria, before the abduction. "But that's what we *want* her to do," he whispered.

"But *she* doesn't know that!"

Harry sighed; he still felt miles away from understanding girls. He didn't really completely understand Hermione, or Ginny, or Cho, or Alicia, or Parvati...

Now the musicians and singers were also leaving, and the candles that had been lighting the hall were being extinguished one by one. Still, Viktor and Cho talked, not even looking over their shoulders to search for Harry and Hermione.

"We should go back to them," Harry said. "We can go to the Three Broomsticks for a while now, give Dumbledore enough time to get back to the castle."

Hermione nodded. She moved away from him, to go down the outer aisle, while Harry went down the center aisle. Cho looked up, looking slightly surprised upon seeing him, as though she forgot that he was her date. There's something very odd about her, he decided. Asks me out, can't talk to me, now she's all chatty with someone whose grasp of English is spotty at best... At the pub, Harry and Hermione again went to the bar for the drinks. Viktor and Cho seemed to pick up their conversation where they'd left off. When they returned with the butterbeers and a few packets of crisps, they refrained from speaking, letting Viktor and Cho continue talking to each other without interruption. Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione. She smiled as she drank. Something was finally going as planned.

When they returned to the entrance, hall, that went smoothly too. Ron met them at the door, informed Harry and Hermione that Dumbledore wanted to see them, and each of them gave their respective date a peck on the cheek and hurried up the stairs; Harry stopped Ron from following them.

"Stay," he whispered. "Watch them. Tell us what happens later, okay?"

Ron nodded, taking his job seriously. "Okay."

Harry and Hermione ran up to Gryffindor Tower and tumbled in the portrait hole ("Portcullis!") and collapsed in armchairs near the fire, smiling at each other as they tried to get their breathing to return to normal. Only a few first and second year students were in the common room, too young to be allowed Hogsmeade visits. Harry still grinned at Hermione and she returned it. He couldn't recall when he'd had a better day. There was somehow something so satisfying about creating a plan and then having the plan actually *work*. He remembered flying on Buckbeak with her to rescue Sirius (and save Buckbeak simultaneously). She had been almost as petrified about riding a hippogriff as she'd been about being picked up by Hagrid's mother. Suddenly the memory made him laugh. She looked at him, still smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just remembering you flying on Buckbeak, and then when Hagrid's mum..."

She put her hand to her stomach. "Oh, don't remind me. Do you want to know what I was thinking of?"

"What?"

She stopped looking so cheerful; her face was very serious now. "Being here. Last night."

Harry stopped grinning too, and looked away from her, toward the fire. "Hermione," he said softly. "We were really taking a chance. Ginny could have--if she'd come down ten or fifteen minutes later--"

"No she couldn't."

"What? Were you planning to suddenly stop? Because I didn't get that impression."

“No, I mean that whenever Ginny came down, we would have had ample warning.”

Harry stared at her, opening his eyes wide. “Oh, is that what this is about? Are we back to that again? For the last time, I don’t have the Sight!”

“Oh, I know,” she said calmly. Harry was perplexed, waiting. The silence stretched. Finally, she said, “But Sandy does.” He let out his breath in relief; she’d figured it out, then. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she whispered fiercely. “I had to go to the library and do a lot of reading about people who’d been Parselmouths. Oh, nothing specifically said that snakes had the Sight, but enough weird things happened to them that I was able to read between the lines. And I have heard Sandy hissing every time you come out with something about what’s about to happen...” He smiled at her again. “Dead smart, you are,” he said, trying to imitate Hagrid’s mother. She laughed. “And before you say anything, I haven’t been taking her to Divination. Not anymore, anyway. Not after the first time. I’m not using her to cheat.”

Hermione smiled. “Actually, I haven’t been feeling ‘dead smart.’ I’ve been feeling a bit dim. I can’t believe it took me this long to figure it out. Has she predicted anything interesting?”

“Not remotely. But the boa said two things. The second one was very interesting: ‘The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.’ I think she can see a couple of months into the future. But I have no idea what she means.”

Hermione’s mouth curled up at the edges. “I have.” She was silent then; Harry waited, but evidently, she wasn’t interested in illuminating him. “But I do have another question: who was Ginny going to meet last night?”

“Um,” Harry said, unprepared. “I can’t tell you.”

Hermione drew her lips into a straight line. “I see. And when were you going to tell me what you’ve been doing every night after dinner?” The Animagus training; she’d noticed.

“Did Ginny tell you?” he wanted to know, alarmed.

“Ginny? She knows? What is it?”

“She--she guessed.”

“So? What IS it?” she repeated.

“I--I can’t tell you about that either. I’m not supposed to...”

“Harry!” she whispered angrily. “if we are going to be together, we need to *tell* each other things.”

“You didn’t tell about the time-turner for our entire *third year!*” he pointed out to her, exasperated.

“I couldn’t--”

“Well, I can’t tell you about this either. And anyway, we’re not really *together*, are we?” he said in a whisper, hoping the first and second years hadn’t heard anything they’d been saying. “I mean, we can’t be. Not yet.”

She sat back, looking hurt and dazed. Then she stood up, her eyes glistening, her voice hard. “Fine. If that’s the way you feel. I have some studying to do for the O.W.L.s.” She rose to go, then came back and leaned over Harry’s chair, speaking in an angry whisper. “And for your information, I think I *know* who Ginny was meeting, but I wanted to give you the chance to tell me yourself!”

She turned and marched up the stairs to the girls’ dorm. Harry sank back into the chair, gripping the arms fiercely, his eyes closed. That’s it, he thought. Get her hacked off at you. Maybe then we won’t risk getting caught in the common room in the middle of the night. Maybe then the Death Eaters won’t come after you...

Just then, the portrait hole opened and Ron climbed in. He sat in the armchair next to Harry's, where Hermione had been.

"So?" Harry asked him. "How'd it go? Did they talk much?"

"They're *still* talking. I thought I had a strong stomach for talking about Quidditch, but those two--"

"So why'd you leave?"

"Well, they looked like they didn't like me lurking around. That's a good sign, huh?" He looked very pleased, as though he were avidly anticipating Hermione and Viktor Krum being a past-tense couple.

"Yeah. Great." Harry leaned back and closed his eyes again.

"What's wrong with you? Where's Hermione?"

He opened his eyes and looked at Ron. "Oh, she went storming upstairs. We had a row."

Ron raised his eyebrows at him. "Now she's getting hacked off at you. Must be that time of mo--"

"Ron!"

He grinned. "Sorry. At home, we've gotten into the habit of explaining Ginny's mood swings that way." Harry shuddered, not wanting to think of Ginny enduring that any more than Hermione. "Anyway, what did you do?"

Harry grimaced; if Hermione knew, he supposed Ron should know too. He stood and took off his robes, then unbuttoned his shirt a little and reached down his left sleeve, withdrawing Sandy carefully.

"It's Sandy. Actually, I named her Cassandra. I call her Sandy because it's shorter. She has the Sight. All snakes do. It's my fault you broke your leg, Ron. Hermione was right. But Sandy was telling me just as I was leaving Divination, yelling, 'I don't have the Sight!' What was I supposed to do? Come back a second later and say, 'Oh, by the way, when you leave, you're going to fall off the ladder. But I still don't have the Sight.'"

Ron was looking at him, thunderstruck. "That explains *so much*."

"Yeah. But you can't tell anyone. Sandy can only see a few minutes into the future in the vicinity right around where she is. And she tends to be somewhat cryptic. And she only gets flashes of the future once in a while."

Ron grimaced. "She sounds as useful as Trelawney." Harry and Ron both laughed.

"Put me back," Sandy hissed at him. "And apologize," she added, sounding slightly hurt.

"I'm sorry Sandy," Harry hissed back, chagrined.

"Was she predicting something?" Ron wanted to know.

"Nah. Just getting hacked off at me, like Hermione." Ron laughed again.

"Want to play Exploding Snap?" he offered. Harry accepted. He needed some fun after the day he'd had. He tried not to picture the woman with the long dark red hair again, singing her death...

* * * * *

The following Tuesday was Halloween. Something started nagging Harry from the moment he woke up in the morning, and after breakfast, he asked Ron and Hermione to give his apologies to Hagrid and Professor Sprout; he thought perhaps a lie-down would help him feel well enough to go to his afternoon classes, History of Magic and Divination. When he'd gone back upstairs, he crawled into bed with his jeans and turtleneck on after throwing his robes with their prefect badge carelessly across the foot of the bed. He curled up in a ball under the covers. Why did he

feel like this? His scar wasn't hurting, but somehow he felt a pain inside which would not subside.

Harry closed his eyes tightly, trying to think of other Halloweens at Hogwarts. He thought of going to Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday party when he was in second year, the awful saw-like sounds emanating from the spirit orchestra, the Headless Hunt arriving, Nick's insistence that he was *as good as* beheaded.

That was it. Nick's deathday. And that wasn't all. It was his parents' deathday, too.

Voldemort had killed them on Halloween, exactly fourteen years ago. Harry pictured them, their shades talking to him when they'd emerged from Voldemort's wand in the graveyard in June, after he'd won the Triwizard Tournament and the cup turned out to be a Portkey....

Their images in the Mirror of Erised, waving at him, along with other relatives he did not know... Their pictures in the album Hagrid had made for him....

Then, suddenly, he knew what he wanted to do: he put his glasses back on and leapt from bed, going to his trunk and getting out the photo album. He sat on top of his robes, cross-legged, opening the album. Then he stopped, surprised; why hadn't he ever noticed that the first page was stuck to the inside of the cover? Actually, it was only stuck in a couple of places. Harry carefully separated the page from the cover and looked at something he'd never seen before. It was an invitation to his parents' wedding. He stared at it, tracing the raised border with flowers on it (lilies, he realized) with his finger. His parents had been married the summer before he was born. They were so young--only nineteen when they married, only a year out of school.

David Llewellyn Evans and Violet Boothwyn-Evans

request the honor of your presence

at the wedding of their daughter

Lily Gwyneth Evans

to

James Godric Potter

Friday, June 21, 1979

at four o'clock in the afternoon

The Willows

Cardiff, Wales

Reception to follow

The favor of a reply is requested

The Willows, thought Harry. That must be the country inn he'd seen in the wedding pictures. His parents married at midsummer. Eleven months later, he was born. What did they do after they graduated? he suddenly wondered. How did they support themselves? He couldn't remember anyone ever telling him. Was it true, as his uncle had once said, that his dad had been unemployed? Couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

He turned the pages, looking at more pictures of the wedding. His parents cutting the wedding cake, dancing...

Wait. There. His mother was dancing with other people. With Sirius, with Lupin, with a younger and less moth-eaten Pettigrew, even. And--

With Severus Snape.

He was looking at his mother sadly, Harry thought. She wasn't looking at him. She seemed to be smiling over his shoulder at his dad, who was standing with Sirius, both of them holding champagne glasses and smiling. Snape actually looked more human in the photo than he usually

looked in person.

Then he came to the picture he liked best. When he'd first gotten the album, it was the one he looked at the most. He was one year old. It was his birthday, in fact. He was sitting on his mother's lap to blow out a single candle on a birthday cake that read "Happy Birthday Harry" in green icing that matched his eyes. He wasn't wearing glasses yet, of course, nor did he have a scar. He was a chubby, average-looking baby with a mop of already unruly black hair, laughing up at his mother and reaching for a lock of her hair. His father wasn't in the picture; he must have taken it and then sent a copy to some friend who had responded when Hagrid wrote to people asking for pictures of his mum and dad. He gazed longingly at his mother. She alternated between smiling at the person with the camera and looking down lovingly at Harry and trying unsuccessfully to take her hair out of his little grasping fist.

Suddenly, he felt *angry*. He slammed the book shut and tried to see straight, but the world seemed blurred, he was so angry. That was the last happy birthday he'd ever had, and he was too young even to remember it. The last birthday where he hadn't been scarred, his last birthday with parents. Voldemort had stolen his childhood from him. He felt like throwing something, yelling, screaming, blasting the room apart with his wand...

Then he took a deep breath and sat down with the book again, opening it once more and looking at the picture of himself on his first birthday with his mother. He swallowed and ran his finger over her image. I won't be that sort of person, he promised her silently. That's not why you died. If that's who you wanted me to be, you'd have bargained for my life like the Malfoys did with their son...

He wondered whether Malfoy knew about that. He remembered Malfoy talking about being on the right side and the wrong side in the coming struggle when they'd been returning to London on the Hogwarts express last June. By which, Malfoy meant the winning side and the losing side. Harry knew he was on the right side; the question was, would it be the winning side? And was Malfoy stuck? Did he have to become whatever his father wanted him to be? What *did* Malfoy want? On the one hand, Harry hoped that maybe Malfoy wanted to be with Ginny enough to do the right thing; on the other hand, Harry hated feeling like he was using Ginny as some sort of bribe, to make Malfoy behave. After all, she was his best friend's sister, he said to himself. *No*, another voice said in the back of his brain. *That's not why it upsets you...*

He slammed the album shut again and went to the silver pitcher near the window to have a cold drink of water. He'd wallowed enough. He had missed Hagrid's class. He would go down to Herbology now. Yes, it was the day his parents had died. But he would not have that be for nothing. He would not let his grief paralyze him and distract him. He threw some cold water on his face and put his robes on, adjusting his prefect badge and examining himself in the mirror. He tried to picture his mother seeing him like this, being proud of him. And then--he knew she *could* see him, that she *was* proud of him.

"Fancy is as fancy does," the mirror told him. He smiled grimly at it and shouldered his bag, ready to join the world again.

* * * * *

The Halloween feast was, as usual, spectacular. Afterward, they dragged themselves upstairs to bed, full of too much good food and without the will to study for a single class (even Hermione). But as soon as they reached the common room, there was a great excitement. Andy Donegal and Barry Bagshot came tearing down the boys' staircase, out of breath and with wild eyes. "Harry! We need your help!"

Oh, no, Harry thought. It's started--

"What is it?" he said, his voice hard, bracing himself for whatever horrors lay ahead.

"Jules's cat is having kittens!"

Harry stopped and stared at the two eleven-year-old boys. Then he broke into a smile, followed by outright guffaws. He was bent double; he could scarcely breathe. His face hurt from laughing so hard. Hermione and Ron stared at him.

"Let's call St. Mungo's," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Harry's gone barmy."

Shaking her head, Hermione told the boys that before she came to Hogwarts, she'd had a cat who'd had kittens (and then run away after they'd given the kittens away, unfortunately). She followed them up to the first-years boys' dorm, followed by Ron and a still-helplessly laughing Harry, who was moving much more slowly than they were, unable to stop the hilarity erupting out of him, as though he'd foregone laughter for years and it was forcing its way out now. He was getting as bad as Mad-Eye Moody, he thought. Next thing I'll be drinking out of a hip flask and trying to stun the dustbins.

When he arrived in the first-years' room, Hermione, Ron, Andy and his twin Amy, Barry Bagshot, Gillian Lockley, Dean's sister Jamaica and Jules Quinn himself were all clustered around the corner near Will's bed. As Harry approached, he saw that Jules' cat was ensconced on what looked suspiciously like a red robe from one of the prefect's bathrooms. She was stretched out while her five kittens mewed and climbed over each other and finally all managed to get organized, lined up at her teats, eating their first meal of their new lives. Three of them were striped, two were black. Right after he entered, Ginny came through the door.

"Harry, I heard--where--oh!" she cried with delight, coming over to the corner and peering down at the domestic scene. Hermione was cooing at the kittens, as were Amy and Jamaica. The boys were also clearly quite taken with the small balls of fluff, but trying to be a little more dignified than the girls. Ron looked over the younger students' heads with a look of authority. "Don't crowd her! They're brand new. You don't want to be so overbearing!"

Then, one of the larger striped kittens, apparently having exhausted the milk supply where he was, climbed over his brothers and sisters and tried to push the smallest kitten away from the teat where it had been feeding.

"Hey! Ron yelled at it, picking it up by the scruff of the neck. Barry cried out and took the kitten from Ron.

"He's mine! Jules said I could have him. He's already got such a little roly-poly belly I'm naming him Roland."

"And I'm taking the big black one," Andy said. "I always wanted to have a cat at home, but mum wouldn't let me because of my allergy. Now that Madam Pomfrey has given me that Potion I went for on my second day here, I can have a cat! I'm naming him Beowulf."

"You can't name him Beowulf," his twin sister informed him. "That's a dog's name."

"He's my kitten and I can name him whatever I want. I won't tell you what to name yours."

"I'm naming mine Butch, because he already seems to be pretty tough. He can take care of himself."

Ron looked down at Jules. "So. They're all spoken for already?"

"Just the boys," he told him. "The runt's a girl and so's the other black one."

Ginny cried out. "Oh! Could I have the black one, Jules?" He smiled and nodded at her, then looked away, blushing. Harry had had the impression that Jules had a bit of a crush on Ginny. The kittens were done feeding now and had separated themselves from the teats. Now their

mother was washing each one carefully, her sandpapery tongue grooming the stickiness from their fluffy fur, for they were all long-haired cats. When the mother was done washing the littlest kitten, Ron leaned over and picked her up gently; she fit in the palm of his hand.

“So, sweetheart,” he said to her softly. “Does no one want you, then? Shall you be mine?” he said, his face very close to her. Harry stood stock-still, surprised. He turned and saw Hermione looking at Ron with a heartbreaking look that made Harry’s throat feel tight. The kitten yawned hugely, prompting a chorus of, “Aaaawws,” from those assembled, and then she curled up in his hands, closing her eyes and starting to purr contentedly.

“I think she likes you,” Jules said, smiling. Harry looked at Hermione, looking at Ron, thinking the same thing.

* * * * *

Harry had tired of talking to snakes in Care of Magical Creatures. He attended class but refrained from entering the enclosure. Finally, half-way through November, Hagrid promised them that they would start in on the Gryffindor animal. Sure enough, when they came to class the next time, the snake enclosure was gone. But instead of there being a large metal cage in the yard to restrain the animal, it was simply sitting in the middle of what had been the goose yard, napping peacefully.

It was an enormous tawny lion.

All of the students were taken aback; the fence around the yard was only about three-and-a-half feet high and would present no real obstacle to the lion were he to try to get at any of them. Harry asked Hagrid whether there was magical fencing around it that the lion could not pass through.

“Nah,” he said casually. “Don’ need it. He don’ harm humans. Plus, he jes’ ate a hundred an’ fifty pound o’ raw meat. Full tummy.”

“What do you mean, doesn’t harm humans?” Ron demanded, keeping Hagrid between him and the sleeping lion. The other students were all around twenty feet from the fence, not daring to move closer.

“What I said. If he were a lion, we’d haff ter worry--”

“What are you talking about?” Ron demanded. “He IS a lion!”

“Oh is he? Well, fer yer information, although fer hundreds o’ years people ‘ere ‘ave been makin’ the mistake o’ calling the Gryffindor house team the lions, an’ callin’ the pitcher on the coat o’ arms a lion, the damn thing AIN’T A LION.”

Harry and Ron made faces at each other. “You’re mental,” Ron said weakly, never having uttered such a thing to Hagrid before, as much as he had thought it many times due to Hagrid’s predilection for extremely dangerous creatures.

But Hermione’s face had a sudden glow of understanding on it. “Oh! Hagrid! Is it really--but, I thought one of those would look like--”

“Yeah, yeah. But there’s more than one kind. This is the Gryffindor kind.”

Harry and Ron still had no clue; the rest of the class, Gryffindors and Slytherins alike, looked very close to bolting back to the castle. Even Blast-Ended Skrewts hadn’t inspired the kind of mass-exodus that seemed imminent.

“Harry, Ron,” said Hermione. “Do you know any French?”

“What?” Ron sputtered. “Hermione, this is no time to be lording your languages over us...”

“No, no, that’s not my point. Do you know what ‘Gryffindor’ *means*?”

“It was Godric Gryffindor’s surname.”

“But people didn’t actually used to have surnames. They were called Uric the Odd and things like that. Someone who did something interesting would get some kind of epithet applied to them, and then it would stick and become the family name. What’s important is what ‘Gryffindor’ means.”

Harry was bewildered. “So what does it mean?”

“Golden griffin. Or rather, griffin d’or, griffin of gold. In *Hogwarts: a History*--” Ron groaned, but Hermione plunged on, ignoring him. “--it says that Godric Gryffindor was an Animagus. Slytherin was the only founder who wasn’t, but he could speak Parseltongue, so that was as good as, I suppose. And when Godric Gryffindor became an animal, he became--” she paused significantly, waiting for one of them to realize what she was about to say and say it with her. But there was silence. She finally grew impatient with waiting and shouted, “A golden griffin!” Hagrid smiled. “Like this one here.”

Harry stared at it. “But Hagrid, it just looks like a lion. And it says in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* that a griffin has an eagle’s head and wings and feet and the hind quarters of a lion.”

“Don’ believe ever’thing you read in that thing,” Hagrid said moodily. “It says horrible things about’--about’ a friend o’ mine...” Harry could think of about a half-dozen creatures to which Hagrid could be referring.

“Harry,” Hermione said excitedly, “that’s a griffin that was produced by a union between a griffin and another lion. So it’s three-quarters lion. Its only eagle attributes are its wings.”

“What wings?” Harry wanted to know; he didn’t see any. Just then, the griffin awoke, sniffed the air and looked around wildly. Then Harry saw that it was looking directly at him. Its nose was moving suspiciously. Harry was already running for Hagrid’s cabin when he realized that a shadow had passed over him; he reached the door and pulled it open, ran in, and slammed it shut, shoving a long bar of wood into the brackets on the back of the door that were designed to hold it. The door thus locked, Harry went cautiously to the window.

The other students had scattered, and Ron and Hermione were huddled by Hagrid. Circling low over the yard was the griffin, its tawny-golden wings held out in what must be a sixteen-foot wing-span, now landing again, folding its wings once more against its flanks so that they disappeared from view. It settled down once more. Harry wondered what he’d done; why had it come after him?

“Take me off,” Sandy hissed at him now.

“What? This isn’t a good time for a conversation, Sandy. There’s a griffin out there who thinks I’m his lunch.”

“No; it is me. He doesn’t want you, he wants me.” Sandy sounded quite confident.

“Why?”

“Griffins and serpents of all kinds are natural enemies. Griffins and basilisks especially, but a small snake like me has no chance against a griffin like that. Please don’t bring me down here again.”

He took her off his arm and placed her near the fireplace, where some glowing embers sat in the banked ashes, along with a number of potatoes in their jackets that Hagrid seemed to be slow-roasting. Sandy stretched out in front of the fireplace, warming her belly.

“You’re sure it wasn’t after me?”

“It does not care about you. You are not a snake.”

Harry went to the door of Hagrid’s hut and opened it cautiously, then closed it behind him.

everyone was looking at him. Malfoy was incredibly gleeful.

“Hey, Potter. Can’t talk to griffins? Maybe you should have been in Slytherin--although we’re all glad you aren’t. It’s bad enough we have to put up with you in two classes and at meals.”

“Shut up, Malfoy!” Harry said at the same time as--surprisingly--Neville. Malfoy turned on him. “Watch your step, Longbottom...”

“You idiot, Malfoy! The griffin was probably reacting to Harry’s snake. Griffins kill snakes; they’re natural enemies. Did you leave it inside, Harry?”

Harry nodded, impressed both by Neville’s standing up to Malfoy and his knowledge of the enmity between griffins and snakes. *Harry* hadn’t known. He’d wondered for some time as to why Neville hadn’t been placed in Hufflepuff, but recently he’d stopped wondering. It was as though Neville had--woken up. As though he’d been sleepwalking when he was younger. Harry didn’t even recall Neville needing his grandmother to send him things he’d forgotten when school had started in September (usually, during the first week of school, Neville got at least one package a day from his grandmother by owl post). And his King Lear report had brought even more praise from Moody than Ron’s essay on Othello. Hermione had been somewhat miffed by his lukewarm reception to her thoughts about Ophelia and Gertrude from Hamlet (she’d changed her mind about doing MacBeth). She had mumbled, “Sexist,” when he had waved aside the significance of their characters.

Now Hermione was clearly also impressed with Neville. Harry walked back over to the enclosure. The griffin was no longer growling, and looked like flightless lion once more. Harry and Neville were the only ones who were interested in approaching the enclosure. The griffin put his front paws up on the top of the fence, looking for all the world like a large dog who wanted someone to play with him. Harry slowly put his hand out to his snout, palm down. The griffin put his large wet nose to Harry’s hand. Harry flinched as the griffin moved his nose all over his hand and then reached out its tongue and licked his skin. Harry froze, wondering whether he would need to run back to Hagrid’s hut in order to save his hand.

Neville reached out his hand and stroked the griffin’s tawny mane. He immediately began to purr loudly and rubbed against Neville’s arm. Harry tried moving his hand up to the mane also, stroking it tentatively. He seemed like a very large happy cat now, purring and closing his eyes. Harry and Neville smiled at each other and Hagrid was pleased.

“Like ter ride ‘im, Neville?”

Neville jerked his head up, his eyes wide. “Could I?” Hagrid smiled at him and Harry stepped back. Neville climbed over the fence and approached the griffin again. Neville bowed to him, and he lowered his head to Neville, then rose regally and slowly spread his wings. They seemed to appear from nowhere, so perfectly did they blend in with his golden flanks. They were both gold and yet transparent at the same time. Neville moved behind the wings and carefully swung his leg over his back, then sank his fingers in the mane to hold on. The griffin took a few running steps, then leapt into the sky, all gold and flying mane and tail, the huge wings moving slowly as it climbed higher, then remaining motionless as it banked, floating on a thermal, preparing to return. Harry was awestruck, watching. The other students--even the Slytherins--were also speechless, struck dumb by the beauty of the griffin’s flight. Harry wished he could have had a photo of Malfoy’s amazed expression.

After Harry collected Sandy (while Hagrid held the griffin in check) they walked to the greenhouses for Herbology. Harry made a decision. He didn’t plan to learn to become a lion; not anymore. He knew what he wanted to be.

A golden griffin.

* * * * *

Chapter Fourteen Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

Harry felt energized again. *A golden griffin.* He hadn't mentioned it to McGonagall yet, because he wasn't completely certain that an Animagus was allowed to become a magical creature, rather than something that most Muggles wouldn't think twice about if they saw it in their world.

It was getting close to their first Quidditch match, which would be the first Saturday in December. Harry suddenly seemed to be talking Quidditch morning, noon and night, driving the other seven players crazy and making even Quidditch-crazy Ron want to stick Harry's Firebolt in his mouth (or somewhere else, he had threatened more than once). He had them practicing every day between the end of classes and dinner, and several times, they missed dinner and had to go down to the kitchens to get something to eat from the house elves. As Hermione usually came down to the Quidditch pitch to watch the practices (and study for the O.W.L.s), she had also missed dinner at these times.

On the Thursday just before the match, they had all missed the evening meal again and were sitting in the kitchens eating at the large central table where the elves usually took their meals. They'd cleared off and were happy to be waiting on Harry and the rest of them. Harry was sitting between Ginny and Katie, who was nursing a cold and sneezing. She'd been to see Madam Pomfrey for a cold remedy already, but it was wearing off, and flying about in the brisk almost-wintery air had not helped. Hermione was opposite the three of them, between Ron and Dobby, who she had insisted sit down and talk to them.

"I is needing to do my work, Miss Hermione. Headmaster is paying me now, remember. I is having to give him his money back if I is not working..."

"Just for a moment, Dobby! I just wanted to ask you--how is Winky?"

Dobby looked happy and sad all at once. "Well, Winky is much happier than when she was here. Winky is belonging to someone again. Headmaster's brother is owning her now, and she is very happy. But--she is not free." Dobby looked down, and Harry wondered how someone who understood the value of freedom could have survived for so many years being owned by the Malfoys.

"Well, Dobby, I'm sorry Winky isn't free. But perhaps it's best that she isn't here at Hogwarts any more. Especially with--" her voice dropped "--Boxing Day coming." She looked up at Harry and seemed alarmed that he was listening. "She wasn't--the best example of freedom." Dobby nodded sagely at her, and then he also saw that Harry was listening to them with a furrowed brow. He jumped up suddenly. "Harry Potter! You is needing more pumpkin juice!" He knew he'd been caught eavesdropping. "No, really, I'm fine, I--"

But suddenly, three house elves were heading his way with pitchers sloshing from being almost overflowing with pumpkin juice. One of them filled his already-full goblet, spilling juice onto his plate of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, turning everything a muddy orange hue, as well as splashing his robes and glasses. The world suddenly looked like a pumpkin had exploded all over it.

Ron was shaking helplessly from laughter, even though a great deal of pumpkin juice had gotten

onto his food as well. Suddenly, an army of house elves had descended upon the table, clearing everything off it and scrubbing it furiously, meticulously replacing everything when they were done. Harry blinked; it was like seeing sped-up film, the way they flew about. When they were done, Hermione was grimacing and Dobby had disappeared. Harry knew how much she disliked the house elves' love of servitude.

Katie left before the rest, so she could return to the hospital wing for more medicine from Madam Pomfrey. As he watched her go, Harry turned to Ginny, speaking softly. "If I need for you to play on Saturday, Ginny, that won't be a problem, will it?"

She frowned. "Why would it be? I've been practicing with everybody else."

"No, I mean--will it be a problem that you'd be going up against Malfoy?"

Now she looked angrier than he'd ever seen her. She seemed to be speaking with great difficulty, in an angry whisper. "HOW can you ask me that? It will definitely NOT be a problem. After all, I didn't have any problem with beating *you* every time I've played you, did I?" And then suddenly, she seemed to realize the implication of what she'd said, and she fled, her hair streaming out behind her. Harry wanted to follow, but Ron said, "What's going on? Is Ginny okay?"

She'd basically been saying that her feelings for Draco Malfoy wouldn't stop her from doing her duty as a Seeker any more than her feelings for Harry had....*Her feelings for Harry*. The question was, were those feelings past tense? Harry wondered.

"Harry? Harry!" Ron yelled, waving his hand in front of Harry's face. "Are you on this planet or not?"

"What? Oh. Ginny's fine. Don't worry. She just--hopes I don't have to put her in the game on Saturday. You know how she is about playing in front of a crowd."

Ron shook his head. "Which I absolutely don't understand. Since she's so good, I mean. You'd think--" but he didn't finish. Harry remembered that when Ron had looked in the Mirror of Erised, he had seen himself as Head Boy and Quidditch captain, holding the Quidditch cup...But that image would never be a reality now, Harry thought. Only prefects were eligible to become Head Boy (the other prefects voted) and if you didn't become a prefect as a fifth year, you'd missed your chance. Only one boy and one girl from the fifth year in each house were named prefects every year. And now he, Harry, was the Quidditch captain. He'd stolen Ron's dream. He'd taken what wasn't his, Harry thought. It was not the first time he'd thought it. He looked back at Ron and Hermione. She'd brought a book to read while she was eating. It had lain forgotten on the table in front of her plate while she'd been talking to Dobby, but now she focused on it again. Ron looked sideways at her while he ate his pudding, as though he thought no one else noticed. No one else did, as far as Harry could tell; except for him.

Harry had been impatient with Ron in the past for his jealousy over things that Harry had which he had no control over: his fame, his money, his being put on the Quidditch team in his first year, his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. But this was different. As much as Hermione said she was out of control around him, Harry knew that when necessary, he was able to control himself with her. He had heeded Sandy twice now when she had warned them of an impending interruption. He could control his urges; Ron would quite rightly feel that he had no excuse, should anything further happen between him and Hermione.

* * * * *

When he was done eating, he went upstairs to meet McGonagall for Animagus training. Except that McGonagall wasn't there. Dumbledore was. Harry approached him cautiously.

“Professor Dumbledore? Where’s Professor McGonagall?”

“Oh, she had some other pressing business. She’ll be able to meet with you tomorrow.” Harry wondered whether it had to do with Rita Skeeter again. He wished Hermione had been able to hear what Dumbledore had proposed to her. “I wanted to meet you here to tell you in person. And also to ask--how’s the training going?”

It had been three months, and McGonagall had been pleasantly surprised by his progress. He could actually change into a lion now, for a few seconds, before reverting to his human form again. It was painful; all of his muscles and joints ached when he did it. McGonagall said that as he managed to increase the amount of time he could stay in his animal form, the pain would become unnoticeable--or, at least, tolerable. He would become accustomed to it. Harry wondered how Wormtail had remained a rat for twelve years. But then, he considered, if you’ve been doing it for that long, you would probably just become numb to the pain.

“Of course it’s a little painful to be an Animagus,” she had told him, as though he were a dim five-year-old. “Haven’t you noticed that I’m rather larger than a *cat*?” Now that he was training to become an Animagus, he understood why Sirius preferred to transform back into a human when he could.

“It’s going well,” Harry told him. “I can show you, if you like.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled at him. “I’d be delighted.”

Harry closed his eyes in concentration. His preparation time was considerably longer than he would have liked. By no stretch of the imagination did he make the change in the blink of an eye. He wondered if he ever would. Harry pictured a lion in his head; he thought about his feet becoming paws, then his hands; his body being covered with tawny fur, his hair lengthening into a mane...

He felt his hands--no, paws, touch the cold stone floor. He opened his eyes. He looked up at Dumbledore, seeing at the edges of his vision his large pink nose, looking down at the huge front paws, feeling his tail swishing, his mane tickling his back--then he cried out. “Aahh!” he groaned, collapsing onto the floor on his stomach, his robes puddling around him, his glasses askew. He was in human form again.

Harry felt like every bone in his body had taken a pounding. It wasn’t like the Cruciatus Curse, he knew, and since he was doing it to himself, he was prepared for what it was going to feel like, but he still wished it didn’t have to hurt so much. He understood all too well now why there were only seven Animagi registered during the previous century. There were obviously some unregistered Animagi--like his own dad, and Rita Skeeter, as well as Sirius and Wormtail--but he still doubted that there were all that many. Not many people were suited to it to begin with, and of those suited to it, not all of them were probably interested in inflicting that kind of pain on themselves on a regular basis.

Harry groaned and raised himself on all fours, then brought his right foot up and leaned his arm on his knee, panting. He looked up when Dumbledore extended a hand to him to help him stand. On his feet again, the throbbing pain had diminished to a dull ache. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked expectantly at Dumbledore, waiting for him to say something about how stupid Harry had been to think he could become an Animagus.

But Dumbledore was smiling and looking impressed all at once. “Harry!” he said. “Very good! I’ve never seen anyone advance to this level so quickly!”

Harry couldn’t believe it, and tried not to look dreadfully pleased by what Dumbledore had said, but his mouth betrayed him and smiled anyway. “Thank you, Headmaster.”

“So, Harry. A lion. I suppose I don’t have to ask you why, eh?”

But Harry had been meaning to ask McGonagall about the griffin. He hadn’t gotten the nerve up yet. “Well, Professor, actually I’ve been thinking that maybe I don’t want my Animagus form to be a lion after all.”

“Oh, really? You’ll have to retreat quite a few steps in your training, you know. Although Minerva did the same thing--Professor McGonagall. Initially, she planned on being an owl. But--tell me. Have you ever seen Professor McGonagall ride a broomstick?”

Harry thought for a moment. “No.”

“Neither has anyone else, that I know of. She can’t stand flying, or heights. It didn’t occur to her that under the circumstances, being an owl wasn’t the wisest course of action. And of course, in some ways, cats are merely owls that have fur instead of feathers. They fit into the same spot on the food chain. Although Minerva says she has never hunted in her cat form, and I believe her. I just can’t picture her eating a mouse.”

Neither could Harry, but the thought made him laugh. He tried quickly to stifle it, but then he saw that Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling again. “So, Harry. What animal do you think you’d like to try?”

“Well, sir, the thing is--I don’t know if it’s allowed. It’s a magical creature, not an ordinary one. I don’t know if the Ministry of Magic will permit it--”

“A magical creature, eh? Perhaps like one you’ve been studying in Hagrid’s class--? Something that looks at first rather *like* a lion?”

Harry didn’t realize right away that his mouth was open; when he did, he shut it immediately.

“How did you--”

Dumbledore smiled, shaking his head. “Whose idea do you think it was to bring the golden griffin here? I *thought* it might give you an idea.”

Harry was dumbfounded. “You--you did it to--”

“It seemed eminently appropriate. Especially since you’ve already killed a basilisk.”

Dumbledore twinkled at him again. Harry laughed.

“Just when I thought I was being original...”

“I hope you don’t feel manipulated Harry,” he smiled at him.

Harry smiled back. “Even though I was.”

“Well, you might as well go back upstairs since Professor McGonagall can’t meet with you. Have a good night, Harry. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you Professor,” he said, turning to go. He couldn’t help grinning as he walked through the empty Great Hall and up the stairs to the common room. As he walked, he realized that he hadn’t had much opportunity in the last two weeks to do extra Potions work, so when he had arrived in the common room, he declined Ron’s offer of a chess game and went to his dorm to get his Potions supplies. When he was back in the common room again, he saw that Hermione was at one of the tables, with sheets of parchment around her covered in complicated Arithmancy formulas. She didn’t look up.

He left the common room again, relieved that she hadn’t noticed him and decided to come along. He was still feeling pretty pleased about the griffin thing, and she was still hacked off that he wouldn’t tell her about the Animagus training. Well, he thought, even Ginny would get a surprise when he finally mastered taking on the form of a golden griffin.

And then, there she was, in the dungeon, adding some kind of dried leaves to her bubbling cauldron, while Malfoy checked ingredients off on a list. Harry stopped short, then collected

himself. I can behave like a grownup, he told himself. I can.

“Hello, Ginny. Malfoy.” She looked up at him, surprised, and turned just a bit pinker than her usual color; perhaps because the last thing she had said to him in the kitchens was that her feelings for him had never gotten in the way of her catching the Snitch first. Malfoy didn’t look especially pleased to see him.

“Potter,” he said evenly, without inflection. He seemed to be holding himself in check. Good, thought Harry. Maybe if neither one of us sets the other off we stand a chance of both getting out of here alive.

He was planning to make Eutharsos Potion. It was at least three-thousand years old and gave a person courage by making them feel safe whether they were or not. He had heard Angelina and George talking about it; they were going to be partners when George attempted to harness the Sun Bulls. Harry wasn’t sure whether this potion was a good idea or not. (He thought of Hermione saying to Moody, “Pain helps protect us.” Fear, he thought, is a kind of protection, too.) It had also reportedly been useful for more mundane purposes, such as helping people who had a phobia about public speaking. That’s what Harry was hoping. He planned to test it on himself.

He was almost done cutting his roots for the potion when Ginny poured her potion into a mason jar using a special wide-mouthed funnel Malfoy apparently owned. She put the rubber seal on the jar and carefully closed it. Immediately, a purplish mist rose from the surface of the green liquid, making the jar look as though it were filled half-way with something green and half-way with something purple.

Harry looked up. “What’s that?” he ventured, hoping she wouldn’t lose her temper with him again. But it was Malfoy who answered.

“Euphemos Potion.” He glared at Malfoy. Harry knew what that was; when he’d been looking up the Eutharsos Potion, the Euphemos had been several pages ahead, and he’d glanced at it while looking for his own potion. (The portion of the Potions book with concoctions from ancient Greece had the titles written in Greek at the top of the page, and therefore they were ordered like the Greek alphabet). It prevented whoever took it from saying anything bad about someone else until it wore off. No matter how hard the person tried, while under the influence of the potion, they could only say nice things about other people. Harry thought of it as a substitute for tongue-biting. He wondered whether Malfoy had tried it.

Ginny and Malfoy packed up their supplies and prepared to go. Ginny looked over her shoulder at Harry. “Good night, Harry,”

He looked at her standing there with Malfoy. His throat was tight. “G’night, Ginny.” She looked at him for a couple of seconds longer, then turned to go with Malfoy. Perhaps she was a good influence on him. It’s a good thing, he had to keep telling himself. A good thing.

When they were gone, he turned back to his potion. He was supposed to boil the roots of *Eupatorium fistulosum* to make the potion. It was actually a weed, and apparently could reach seven feet or more, with flower heads more than a foot across. He made sure he didn’t use *Eupatorium perfoliatum* instead; that was a treatment for broken bones. Although, he thought, if you did enough foolhardy things while under the influence of the Eutharsos Potion, you might need a good boneset.

Harry took off his robes to work. No one was around; who cared whether he looked like a proper prefect? But then Snape came striding into the room. He stopped short on seeing Harry. His expression reminded him of when Harry had been in the dungeon under the Invisibility

Cloak; was Snape going to be having another talk with Sirius? Harry remembered that Snape was planning to get the Malfoys' hairs on Saturday, when they came to see their son play in the Quidditch match against Gryffindor. Then the Polyjuice Potion would really be ready for use. Nothing had happened to the Weasleys so far, Harry thought thankfully. Hopefully nothing would.

"You're working late, Potter. Seems like you're in here a lot lately. Turned over a new leaf?"

"I plan to do well on my O.W.L.s, sir," Harry said as evenly as he could. Damn! He really needed those roots to finish boiling. The water was just starting to bubble.

"Hmph. Well. I must say I'm surprised that you're voluntarily doing extra work. Your father certainly never did."

He strode across the dungeon to his office door, unlocked it and entered, closing it sharply behind him. Harry seethed; I shouldn't let him get to me. I shouldn't let him get to me.

Finally, the roots had boiled long enough. Using cheesecloth, Harry strained the potion into a wide-mouthed beaker. The liquid was murky, with swirls of brown and green. Harry looked in his book again, to check for any side effects. All it said was that depending on the person's weight, the potion was likely to have an effect lasting three days.

Harry stared at it for another minute before picking up the beaker like a drinking glass and raising it to his mouth. He drank it quickly, before he lost his nerve. It tasted like old cabbage, he thought. Should have checked to see if I could have added some mint or something. He put down the beaker, starting to feel lightheaded as the potion started to act on his system. He felt a kind of numbness seep through his body, as, one by one, different parts of him fell asleep. Then, one by one, they woke up again.

He felt strangely alert and determined. He looked around; everything in the dungeon seemed to have an amazing clarity. He felt the same as he did the first time he'd gotten his glasses when he was seven. He'd been having trouble seeing the blackboard at school, and the school nurse tested his eyesight and told the Dursleys that he would need glasses. The first time he'd put them on, he was amazed; the world looked so crisp and clear! The leaves on trees had distinct, individual outlines; they were no longer a mass of green and yellow. It was one of the few times during his early life when he'd been happy about anything. He could *really see* now.

At least, he'd thought it was a good thing until Dudley and his bullying friends had looked on it as yet another way to torture Harry, to try to take his glasses. At those times, he had unwittingly performed some wandless magic, making his glasses such a part of him that no matter what Dudley and his cohorts did, they would not come off his face. Of course, he was the one who'd gotten in trouble. His aunt had screamed at him, "What did you do? Dudley says he can't get your glasses off your face! You didn't do something stupid like glue them on, did you?" and she'd reached over and pulled them off his face easily. Nevermind that Dudley shouldn't have been trying to take his glasses.

Harry swallowed and walked over to the door of Snape's office. He knocked firmly. He felt empowered, fearless. I just hope I don't do something stupid, he thought. Perhaps he should have asked Ginny whether he could take some of her Euphemus Potion, too, so his potion-induced bravery didn't lead him to say something guaranteed to get him a detention.

"Alohomora!" Snape's door opened. He was sitting in the chair near the fireplace again. He had a glass with some amber liquid in his hand and Harry saw that a bottle of Ogden's Best Firewhiskey was on the desk. Snape seemed unconcerned about his seeing this. Harry looked at the fireplace, but he couldn't tell whether Snape had been speaking to someone.

“What is it, Potter?” he said after Harry had been looking around the room for a few seconds. Harry was surprised at the way his voice sounded when he spoke; not a bit of his usual waver. “Professor, you said that my father never did extra work. I hear you say a lot of things about my father. I never hear anything about my mother. What about her?”

Snape actually looked startled; then he looked down at his glass, raised it to his lips and drained it. To Harry, it seemed a great deal of whiskey to drink so quickly. Snape gasped when he had swallowed, then looked down at his glass again.

“Your mother,” he said so softly that Harry had to strain to hear him, “was quite simply the most brilliant potions student that Hogwarts has ever seen.”

Harry thought he was going to die from shock. He’d never expected to hear *that*. Snape still contemplated his empty glass. He didn’t say anything else. Harry stared at him for a minute, then turned and left without a word. There was nothing he could say to Snape. Nothing that could penetrate years of enmity and house-wars, plus the hatred Snape held for his father.

Once he was in the dungeon again, Snape muttered something and his office door slammed shut again, echoing in the high-ceilinged room for a minute at least. Harry looked at the closed door. He mused, *There but for the love of Ginny Weasley goes Draco Malfoy...* But at least Snape was on Dumbledore’s side, Harry thought. He became a Death Eater when he lost my mum, but her death brought him back into the fold. Draco Malfoy could help me, Harry thought, if I only knew how to harness what he knows, and to take advantage of the access he has to his father...

And then and there, he began to formulate in his mind exactly how he was going to get Draco Malfoy to trap his own father. Hopefully, he would do it. Harry knew what he’d have to dangle in front of him to get him to agree.

Ginny.

* * * * *

On Friday night, Harry had ordered the team into bed at eight o’clock, as Oliver Wood used to do. Saturday dawned damp and oppressively humid for December. Harry rose early, standing at the window, looking out over the grounds toward the Quidditch pitch. This would be his first game as captain. He wished desperately that Oliver were here. He took a deep breath. He never imagined what would happen that first time he leapt on his broomstick to chase Draco Malfoy and get back Neville’s Remembrall...the feeling of exhilaration the first time he soared through the air, robes whipping about behind him. He smiled. Malfoy was sometimes good for something, he thought. Harry would never have been the youngest house player in a century if it weren’t for Malfoy.

He’d told the entire team that on Saturday morning he expected them to come running with him. He wanted everyone to have plenty of stamina for the game. And he wanted them to go running outside, rather than inside the Great Hall; they needed to get the cold air in their lungs as early as possible, so it wouldn’t be a shock to their systems later in the day when the game started. He dressed in a fleece sweatsuit and laced up his sneakers, carrying Sandy in his hand; he would leave her by the fire in the common room, so she’d be warm. Then he had a sudden inspiration. He crept over to Ron, still snoring blissfully. He held Sandy right above his face and said in a sing-song falsetto, “Ro-on! Oh Ron! Time to get up!”

Ron muttered in his sleep; Harry lowered Sandy closer to Ron. Her tongue darted out and touched Ron’s chin for a split second. Ron’s eyes flew open. He saw the snake an inch away from his face and promptly screamed. Harry was nearly helpless with laughter; Ron pulled

himself up in bed.

“Don’t do that again!” Ron and Sandy said simultaneously, Ron in English, Sandy in Parseltongue. Hearing their exclamations overlapping but with the same meaning, Harry collapsed in laughter again, pounding Ron’s mattress and leaning on one of the posts at the foot of the bed for support. He looked up at Ron, who glowered at him. He wondered if he’d done that because he was still feeling the effects of the Eutharsos Potion. It *had* been funny.

Ron threw his pillow at him.

Still laughing, Harry left the room with Sandy, calling over his shoulder, “Get dressed! You have ten minutes!” He practically skipped down the stairs to the common room. It was going to be a good day; he could feel it.

He carefully placed Sandy on the hearthrug, where she curled into a coil and closed her eyes. Quinn’s cat had come downstairs to sleep by the fire also. Quinn had found an old basket which now held the bathrobe on which the mother cat had given birth. The kittens were curled up in the curve of her body, draped over one another, looking to Harry’s eyes uncomfortably close, but they all seemed happy enough. They were four weeks old now. It would be at least three more weeks before they could be weaned. Ron’s was the smallest, the runt; he had named her Argent, for her silver stripes. The mother was named Bainbridge, for the street Jules had lived on in his town. Ginny had named her fluffy black kitten MacKenzie, because Parvati and Lavender discussing MacBeth had made her want to read it, and then she came to the conclusion that of course a witch should have a black cat with a Scottish name, and MacKenzie was the Scottish name she liked best.

One by one, the team members came staggering down the stairs, in various interesting types of exercise clothing. Hermione also came downstairs to run as usual. After warming up, they all trooped out of the portrait hole and started down the stairs. Suddenly, Harry stopped and looked around.

“Where’s Katie?” he wanted to know. Alicia and Angelina looked at each other.

“I thought you were getting her up,” Angelina said to Alicia.

“I thought you were.”

“All right,” Harry said, breaking in. “Could somebody go upstairs and wake her up? The rest of us will have to wait.”

Alicia and Angelina shared the seventh-year girls’ dorm with two other girls, but Katie wasn’t one of them as she was a sixth-year. She was a prefect, too, and Harry had caught her looking at him at prefects’ meetings, along with the other usual girls. Angelina went up the stairs again to rouse Katie. They sat down on the steps to wait for her return. When she came back, she was alone.

“She wasn’t in her bed. I had to wake her roommates. They said she’d stayed in the hospital wing last night. She has something called mono--mono--”

“Mononucleosis?” Hermione breathed, stunned.

“What’s that?” Fred asked. Hermione looked at Harry and colored.

“It’s called the kissing disease,” Alicia chimed in. “Usually gets passed on by swapping spit--you know. But sometimes, if you’re just in close proximity to someone who has it or you share a glass or something, you can also get it. In the Muggle world it’s very contagious, and usually means bedrest for a month or more. But Madam Pomfrey should probably have her up and around by Monday.”

“Monday?” Harry cried. Then he looked at Ginny in her running clothes, a braided ponytail

keeping her hair out of her way. "Well, it's a good thing we have a reserve Seeker." He smiled at her; she gave back to him a frankly terrified look. But then something else occurred to Harry. "I've got an idea," he said slowly. "Most of you are more experienced than me, so hear me out and tell me if you think I'm crazy..." He licked his lips and narrowed his eyes. Hermione looked at him as though she were trying to read his mind. "I know that Rule #5 of Quidditch is that there are no substitutions during the game; if a player is injured, he leaves the game and that team plays with one less player, correct?" The other team members nodded in agreement. "But can you *switch* which players are playing which positions part of the way through the game?" He looked at them all. Angelina and Alicia looked at each other; so did Ron and Fred, Ginny and George.

"There's no rule against it," said George. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I think we'll give Slytherin house a little surprise. When the game starts, we'll say that Ginny is taking Katie's place as Chaser--"

"But I've never practiced to be a Chaser!" Ginny said plaintively.

"It's okay. It'll be temporary. Now, at that point, Ron will be playing Keeper, so we know they're unlikely to have scored at all--" he smiled at Ron, whose ears turned very red. "But since Alicia, Angelina and Katie usually work together to score, it's possible that we'll be scoreless too. Unless I see the Snitch fairly early. But--" he paused. "If they start scoring on us, or if their Beaters start really coming after us--I'll call for a time-out and tell Madam Hooch we're rearranging our line-up. We'll resume with Ron as a Chaser--we're bound to score, then, if we haven't already--" Ron was getting redder by the minute "--I'll go in as Keeper, and Ginny, you'll go in as Seeker. And *then* Slytherin will be sorry they woke up today."

Harry smiled at them all; everyone but Ginny appeared to be happily anticipating the surprise the Slytherins would get. Ginny looked rather like she had when she was eleven, and she was afraid Harry wouldn't like her singing Valentine. He put his hand on her arm.

"It'll be fine, Gin. You'll be fine. Don't worry."

She nodded grimly at him, her eyes very large. She really was scared to play in front of a crowd, he realized. It wasn't just talk...

After running, Harry used the showers that he used to use before he was a prefect; he didn't feel like running into Malfoy before the game. The Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall in their red Quidditch robes, carrying their broomsticks (including the four new Nimbus 2001's now owned by the Weasley team members). A cheer went up from the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables; no one wanted Slytherin to win except Slytherin. Harry looked over at Malfoy and grinned; but he could see that Malfoy wasn't looking at him. He was staring in amazement at Ginny. He rose and walked over to Harry.

"Potter! We have to talk!"

"So talk."

Malfoy looked around; everyone in the hall was looking at them. He spoke in an alarmed whisper. "What's she doing wearing that?"

"Ginny's playing today. Katie's in the hospital wing. Do you expect us to play with only six people?"

"But--"

"Sit down, Malfoy. Eat a hearty breakfast. It'll be the last good thing that happens to you today."

Malfoy turned and returned to the Slytherin table, steam virtually coming out of his ears. Ron

looked at Harry suspiciously.

“What was all that about?”

Harry looked at him, hoping he didn't look as guilty as he felt. “Oh--you know Malfoy. Thought we were pulling a fast one, putting in Ginny, like we were going to play eight people or something. I told him Katie's in the hospital wing.”

After the Gryffindor team finished, they left the hall to more cheers from all of the non-Slytherin tables, and then the entire population of the school, it seemed, flowed like lava from a volcano toward the Quidditch pitch.

Harry went to see Madam Hooch to check on the possibility of changing player positions during the game. She consulted *Quidditch Through the Ages* by Kennilworthy Whisp, and came up dry. “Nothing that says you can't,” she told him. “Why?”

“Just in case,” Harry told her cryptically. Then he went to Lee Jordan, who was doing commentary for the game, and told him that Ginny would be playing instead of Katie. He looked alarmed.

“Why?”

“She's laid up in the hospital wing with mononucleosis. She'll probably be fine by Monday.”

“She's got WHAT?” he said, his eyes wide. Uh-oh, Harry thought. Had he perhaps been kissing Katie? Well, well--

Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Lee sat down next to McGonagall, smiling feebly, still looking aghast by what Harry had told him. Harry and the other team members assembled in the center of the pitch, along with the Slytherin team. He noticed that they'd added some girls to replace players who had graduated; Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode were the new Chasers. He supposed they'd been there that day when Malfoy had ordered him and Hermione off the Quidditch pitch, but he hadn't taken notice of much other than the new Nimbus 3000 broomsticks. Crabbe and Goyle were Beaters. There's a shock, thought Harry. Malfoy was still the Seeker, of course, and now that he was captain, Harry had to shake his hand before the start of the game.

They stood for what seemed a very long moment, eyes locked, emerald green and storm grey. Then Harry extended his hand first and Malfoy somewhat slowly moved his hand to meet it. Malfoy's skin felt dry and cold, as though he had a circulation problem. Harry was glad to be able to release it.

They all mounted their brooms and when Madam Hooch gave the signal, fifteen brooms rose into the air and the game began.

“Angelina Johnson gets the first possession of the Quaffle. She passes to Alicia Spinnet. Watch out! Head Girl coming. And Alicia passes to Ginny Weasley, substituting today for Katie Bell who's--under the weather--” Lee choked. McGonagall looked at him strangely.

Harry flew above the fray in an elliptical circuit that covered the whole field, keeping track of the action but also scanning for the Snitch. Ginny looked nervous as she took the Quaffle, and then--

“Oh! Ginny Weasley's dropped the Quaffle. Slytherin in possession, Bulstrode passes to Parkinson, back to Bulstrode who's going to try to score--Yes! Saved by Ron Weasley, the Lions' new Keeper!”

Ron grinned, holding the red ball over his head, then, still holding onto the Quaffle, he had to go into a Sloth Grip Roll to avoid a Bludger that had been hit at him by Crabbe.

The Gryffindors had the Quaffle again, but once more, Ginny was the weak link in the scoring

dance, and the Slytherins took possession again, although Ron stopped them from scoring once more. This pattern was repeated five more times; Harry hadn't seen the Snitch, and he felt it was getting pretty tiring. There was no score yet.

Harry signaled to Madam Hooch for a time out. He landed on the ground next to her. Malfoy alit a moment later.

"What're you pulling, Potter?"

Harry ignored him and spoke to Madam Hooch. "I want to rearrange our line-up."

"What?" came Malfoy's indignant response. "You can't. No substitutions. That's the rule."

"It's not a substitution. All seven players will be the same. But some will be in different positions than they started."

Madam Hooch looked at Malfoy. "It's legal. Go see Jordan, Potter, and have him announce the changes."

After Harry spoke to him, Lee announced, "There have been some changes in the positions the Gryffindor players will be holding. Ron Weasley will now be playing Chaser; Captain Harry Potter will play Keeper; and Ginny Weasley will play Seeker."

A collective gasp went up from the spectators; Harry wasn't going to be playing Seeker? He looked over to where the Weasleys were sitting. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had looked so proud that four of the seven players on the Gryffindor team were their children; now they looked positively shocked that Ginny would be playing Seeker. Charlie, Bill and Percy were sitting in the row in front of their parents. The older brothers exchanged knowing looks, smiling.

Then Harry saw Malfoy's face; he was furious. He saw Malfoy mouth the words *I hate you*. Harry smiled beatifically at him. The play resumed, and the difference was like night and day. Ron and Alicia and Angelina tossed the Quaffle back and forth effortlessly. Ron feinted that he was aiming at the goal on the Slytherin Keeper's left, then somehow sent it sailing into the one all the way on the Keeper's right.

"Ten to nothing, Gryffindor!" Lee Jordan shouted gleefully. It happened again and again; Harry was starting to get downright bored as the Gryffindor Keeper; the Slytherin Chasers couldn't get anywhere near the Quaffle, and George and Fred were surpassing themselves at hitting Bludgers that kept the Slytherins dodging and weaving to protect themselves.

"Fifty to nothing, Gryffindor!" Lee cried. Then, in no time, it seemed, "Ninety to nothing, Gryffindor!" Harry felt like he blinked, then Lee proclaimed, "One-twenty to nothing. GRYFFINDOR!"

The crowd seemed to be in the grip of some mass hysteria. The screaming and yelling seemed to be all that Harry could hear, but somehow he didn't mind. He noticed Cho in the stands, for some reason near the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy had turned to talk to her. She smiled at him; he wished he could pay more attention to what was going on between them, but suddenly, Harry saw that a Bludger was heading right for Ginny. Fred and George were heading for her, but Harry could see that they wouldn't be in time. His heart leapt into his throat, hoping it would miss her--

And then Malfoy swooped in and positioned his broom so that the perfectly groomed Nimbus 3000 twigs would take the brunt of the Bludger, thus protecting Ginny. The impact of the Bludger on Malfoy's broom was so great that Malfoy fell off and he wound up in the Starfish and Stick position, which was usually a Keeper defense where the Keeper held onto the broom with one hand and one foot curled around the handle, while keeping the other limbs stretched out. Malfoy scrambled to get seated again. Harry could see that Ginny was furious.

“Time!” Harry yelled to Madam Hooch.

Harry soared down to the grass again. Malfoy landed beside him a few moments later. Madam Hooch looked impatient.

“Changing the positions again, Potter?”

“No. I just need a word with the Slytherin captain.”

Madam Hooch moved away, but kept an eye on them. Harry tried to speak low enough that she wouldn’t hear.

“Malfoy! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What do you think I think I’m doing? That Bludger was heading right for Ginny!” he whispered back angrily.

“You are the Slytherin captain. Act like it! Ginny’s out here to win, like the rest of us. If she thinks you’re cutting her slack because of--well, cutting her slack, she’ll never speak to you again, I can guarantee it. She’s too proud for that. And I’ll tell you something else Malfoy; I didn’t put her in to throw you off. That’s just a fringe benefit. I put her in because she’s damn good, and because of her we’re going to win. NOT because you’re trying to be nice to her. This isn’t time to be nice. It’s war. I’ll thank you to remember which side you’re on. No one’s going to say we won this game because you threw it. I won’t have it tainted that way.”

Malfoy glared at him, then looked over at Ginny. Harry looked too. Ginny’s hair was escaping its braid, and her eyes looked wild. She was angrier than Harry had ever seen her.

“Now do you believe me? If looks could kill--”

“Yeah, I get it. You’d be doing a dance over my dead body right now.”

“Are you going to play to win, now?”

Malfoy set his jaw. “Just watch me.”

Harry grinned. “I didn’t say you were *going* to win.”

They rose into the air again, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle to restart the game.

Ron and Alicia and Angelina scored forty more points; it was now one-sixty to nothing. Even if Malfoy were to miraculously catch the Snitch before Ginny, they would still win the game. Harry flew in a small circle before the goals in one direction, then the other, to avoid getting dizzy.

Then--he saw the Snitch. It was a foot or two off the ground hovering near the middle Slytherin goal post. He itched to get it, but he knew he dared not; that would be a foul called a Snitchnip. Only the Seeker was allowed to touch the Snitch. He looked up and realized he needn’t have worried. Ginny was diving toward the Snitch, Malfoy having to turn in the middle of having been going in the opposite direction. There was no way he would make it there before her, although he looked like he was trying. The next thing Harry knew, Ginny was flying a circuit around the field, holding the Snitch above her head, the crowd roaring its approval, Lee Jordan practically hoarse.

“AND GINNY WEASLEY HAS THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS, THREE-HUNDRED TEN TO NOTHING!”

It was unprecedented. Slytherin hadn’t scored once. Harry and the rest of the team flew over to Ginny. They all landed in a tangle of arms and legs, everybody hugging everybody else, Ron and Harry, Ron and Alicia, George and Angelina (although not everybody was kissing like that), Fred and Ginny, and then finally Harry finally found himself face to face with Ginny. She looked more beautiful than he’d ever seen her, her eyes shining, her face glowing, her hair wild. He grinned at her and threw his arms around her, then kissed her soundly on the mouth, quickly, before he lost his nerve. She stared at him, speechless, while the crowd jostled them and

separated them again, the excited pairings going through one recombination after another. Harry turned and found himself face to face with Hermione. She was livid. She brought her foot down on his left foot quite hard and turned on her heel, pushing people out of her way. Harry yelled and started to hop on one foot, his eyes squeezed shut in pain. When he opened his eyes again, his foot throbbing, he realized that no one had noticed. Wait--he was wrong. Malfoy was looking right at him, smirking. He *would* think that was funny, thought Harry.

But then he could see that Malfoy had very little reason to go on smirking. Snape and Lucius Malfoy and several teammates were rounding on him, voices raised. Harry could see that Malfoy was raising his hands helplessly, shaking his head and shrugging. Harry remembered that Snape knew about Malfoy and Ginny; he probably suspected that Malfoy had thrown the game. Harry seethed. He would *not* have people thinking that was the only way they could win.

Harry wasn't sure why, but he walked over to the angry Slytherins who had gathered around Malfoy. He heard things like, "Letting a girl beat you..." He pushed through the crowd until he was facing Malfoy. A sudden quiet descended. Draco Malfoy stood looking at him, stony-faced. Harry extended his hand. "Good game, Malfoy." Malfoy took his hand, but let it go quickly. He didn't speak, so Harry continued speaking. "I know we surprised you with Ginny. You had no way of knowing how good she is. I didn't know until I played her at the Weasleys this summer. Even Charlie's never beaten her, he says." He let that sink into the crowd; the great Seeker Charlie Weasley had never beaten his little sister? Harry heard murmuring. "And then adding Ron to that, well--you had no way of knowing. Never played either one of them before, did you?"

Malfoy looked at him gratefully. Harry acknowledged it with a nod, then turned to go. He caught Lucius Malfoy's eye for a moment; it was the coldest look Harry had ever seen. Harry felt as though he'd drunk ice water. He looked away from Malfoy's father and returned to the happy throng of Gryffindor supporters, smiling and anticipating the celebration that would take place in the common room. But then--he remembered Cho talking to Lucius Malfoy during the game. He turned, looking for her. Odd; she was still in her seat, staring into space. No one else was sitting around her. Everyone else was on the field celebrating or had started back to the castle.

He climbed up the stands slowly, cautiously approaching her. She was still not moving. Harry's heart thudded painfully; was she all right? What had Malfoy's dad done to her?

But when he was finally standing next to her, she suddenly seemed to come to life again. "Oh, hello, Harry. Good game! Congratulations!"

He looked at her, his brow furrowed. She was acting like nothing was wrong, as though she hadn't been virtually catatonic a moment before. He sat next to her. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" He stared at her still, wondering whether to worry. Was he placing her in danger?

She was looking concerned now. "Harry? Is something wrong? Can I give you a congratulations kiss?"

Harry tried to shake off his feeling of uneasiness. He smiled feebly at her as she moved closer to him. When their lips met, she melted into him in a way she'd never done before; he'd always felt before that her kisses were somewhat mechanical and choreographed. This was different, this was--

Harry clutched at her, feeling her hands going into his hair. He opened his eyes a crack; the Quidditch pitch was deserted. There was no one left to see them. He closed his eyes once

more, trying to remind himself that it was a good thing that she and Krum seemed to be getting along, so the masquerade could end soon. Is that what this is? Harry wondered. Guilt-snogging? If so, she was very good at it.

Harry was glad he wasn't supposed to be treating her terribly yet. There were some ghosts of doubt in the back of his mind, but he pushed them away. (The ghost that looked like Ginny was a little harder to push away than the ghost that looked like Hermione. Ginny hadn't tried to cripple him.) He released the guilt and doubt and became, for the moment, just another fifteen-year-old boy kissing his girlfriend....

* * * * *

Chapter Fifteen

Dueling With Snape

Harry rode on the high of the Quidditch victory all weekend. He awoke Monday morning with something that felt almost like a hangover; a headache he knew had nothing to do with his scar. It was simply the headache of having to come crashing down into the everyday world again, into--

Potions.

First thing after breakfast.

Harry groaned as he trudged down the stone stairs with Ron and Hermione and the rest of the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Hermione still wasn't speaking to him. (She still came downstairs to run with him in the morning, but pointedly refused to talk to him the entire time.) This was in sharp contrast to everyone else in the school (all the non-Slytherins, anyway) who were treating Harry as even more of a hero than usual, for having been captain of the team that captured such a stunning victory.

Ron had also come in for his share of admiration; Padma Patil, of all people, had wangled an invitation to the Gryffindor common room from her twin on Sunday, and she and Parvati had spent a great deal of time with Ron, who looked like he couldn't believe his good fortune, surrounded by gorgeous twins who were hanging on his every word. It didn't hurt that he'd just adopted an adorable tiny kitten who had quickly become very attached to him. The Patil twins exclaimed over Argent's every yawn, every stretch, the way she washed her face, the way she clawed her way up Ron's robes to reach him. After the Yule Ball, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if Padma had never acknowledged Ron's existence again, but now he was the star Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Hermione seemed to be as annoyed with Ron as she was with Harry; every time she looked up from her reading at Ron and the Patil twins, she was looking daggers at him.

And Ginny! Another extraordinary thing that had happened on Sunday was that a virtual storm of owls descended on the Gryffindor table at breakfast bearing invitations for Ginny to join various boys in walks around the lake or in the gardens. Some of them were boys she'd never met or talked to. She colored more deeply with each successive letter she read. The owls didn't stop once she was back in the common room. They were beating their wings against the windows, demanding to be let in. Harry knew that if he went to the window and opened it, the owl would fly straight to Ginny, and he wasn't wrong once.

He could tell that she was extremely uncomfortable about her new notoriety, however. Handing her yet another letter, he suggested to her quietly that she send an owl of her own--to Malfoy, so they could meet in the Potions Dungeon. She smiled at him gratefully; the owls wouldn't be

able to get at her where there weren't windows. She stayed in the dungeon for much of the afternoon, and Harry had to fight the urge to check on them. She hadn't said anything to him about his kissing her after the game, and he hadn't said anything to her. It was as though it had never happened (except for a lingering pain in Harry's left foot, from Hermione's reaction). Harry had also seen Hermione glaring at Ginny.

Thinking of Malfoy and Ginny made Harry think of Snape and his mother, that other Gryffindor/Slytherin combination. As he walked down to the dungeons, Harry remembered what Snape had said about her and potions. It sounded like his mother was very much on Snape's mind these days, as he engaged in his covert work. It seemed that he was still tortured about not having been able to save her from Voldemort. *Snape* probably would have been a better secret keeper than Pettigrew, reflected Harry. He remembered the trials he'd seen in Dumbledore's Pensieve, the hard-faced Death Eaters, and the way Dumbledore had stood and defended Snape when Karkaroff had tried to implicate him in order to get out of Azkaban. If only there were some way for him to understand better, to understand what his mother ever saw in him, understand why Dumbledore trusted him...

And then, as he was unpacking his potions supplies, he had it: *The Pensieve*. If only Snape had a Pensieve; if only he would use it to store whatever memories he had of his mum...And then, if Harry could devise some way to access it, to enter it as he had entered Dumbledore's Pensieve...It was risky. And perhaps a bit invasive, like reading another person's diary. Harry shook his head. He'd think about all that later. He didn't even know where to get a Pensieve... "Potter? Potter!" came Snape's voice now through his confused thoughts. Harry jerked his head up. How many times had Snape said his name?

"Yes, Professor?" he said, as respectfully as he could, which wasn't his usual attitude toward him. Snape noticed the difference, and looked unnerved.

"Having you been eating *Crocus colchicum* instead of preparing to make the Snake-Venom Antidote?"

"Have I been eating--what?"

Snape sighed deeply. "Who can tell Potter why I would ask him whether he'd been eating *Crocus colchicum* ?

Hermione's hand flew up. Her face looked grim. For once Snape did not hesitate to call on her. She seemed to be trying to sound even more like an annoying know-it-all than usual.

"*Crocus colchicum* is a species of the genus *crocus* that is highly toxic. In ancient Greece, malingering slaves would eat just enough of the bulb to be too sick to work the next day." She gave Harry a hard look from across the room. Harry could tell that Snape saw; a smile curled at the corners of his mouth. He was clearly enjoying seeing that Harry and Hermione were on the outs. All right, thought Harry, I'm trying to understand him better *why*? But then, he remembered his talking to Sirius about why his mum dumped him for his dad. He'd left something out; but what?

Snape moved to the front of the class. "Now, usually, you are not required to have *Hieracium venosum* , or rattlesnake-weed, in your potions kit, so I have some up here that Professor Sprout has been cultivating in the greenhouses. Come up in an orderly fashion to get one of the plants..."

Harry tried to stay focused while he worked. Ron was his partner while Hermione worked with Neville. He noticed that Malfoy didn't seem quite well; he was even paler than usual, if that was possible, with dark circles under his eyes. He kept rubbing his arms when he thought no one

was looking. Harry thought about the cold look Lucius Malfoy had given him on Saturday, and the way he ganged up on his son after the game along with the other Slytherins and Snape himself. What had Malfoy's dad done to him? Harry wondered. He remembered him talking about legal curses that were still very painful...Malfoy certainly looked in pain, just now. Harry wondered fleetingly what his dad had done to him the other times Slytherin had been beaten in Quidditch. Then he shook his head; it wouldn't do any good to think about that. It wasn't his lookout if Malfoy's father couldn't understand it was just a game.

Just a game. Harry smiled to himself. He never imagined he would think that about Quidditch. "POTTER!" Snape yelled again, and during the rest of the class, Harry tried very hard not to let his mind wander. Although, he reflected, I'm probably the last one here who would ever need a snake-venom antidote....

* * * * *

After classes were over for the day, Harry hurried up to the common room to write a letter to Sirius, to ask him whether he knew of some way to acquire a Pensieve. Harry told him he would pay him from his Gringott's vault. I hope it doesn't cost ten-thousand galleons, he thought. What might a Pensieve be worth?

Harry thought about the Pensieve all through dinner. He was feeling somewhat distracted. Then, when he went for Animagus training after dinner that evening, Professor McGonagall wasn't there again. He felt like he'd woken up, looking around for her. Dumbledore wasn't there either. Then he went over to the fireplace and saw that she'd left a note on the mantel telling him to go to Hagrid's. That's odd, he thought.

He walked down the sloping lawn to Hagrid's hut, shivering in the December wind; he hadn't brought a cloak. His black school robes whipped around him. When he arrived at the enclosure where the golden griffin was, Harry was glad that he wasn't in the habit of wearing Sandy to go to Animagus training. In fact, Ginny was doing him the favor of wearing Sandy on her arm for him, under her robes, as she was the only one who knew about the training (and since she usually found it very difficult to refuse to do anything he asked--he tried not to feel guilty about that). McGonagall was standing outside the fence, waiting for him.

During the previous Friday's training session, she had told him that Dumbledore had told her of his wish to learn to transform into a golden griffin. She didn't seem surprised. Luckily, the lion form he'd been transforming into wasn't all that different; he only needed to learn to produce the wings, otherwise he was nearly there. That and learning to tolerate the excruciating pain and maintain the griffin form for more than two seconds.

"Hello, Potter," she greeted him, also shivering in the cold somewhat.

"Hello, Professor."

"As your head-of-house, I have some leeway in these matters, and so I am giving you permission to spend this week sleeping out here with the golden griffin. It is a necessary step in your training. You need to bond with a specimen of the animal you will be transforming into."

Harry pulled his robes closer around his body as a gust of wintry air hit him. "Sleep? Out here? Couldn't we--take the griffin up to the castle?"

"No. We can't."

"Well--but what are the other students in Gryffindor going to think? About me not sleeping in my own dorm all week?"

"Hmmm..." she said, brow furrowed. Then she brightened. "Ah. You've got detention. All week."

“Detention for what?”

“Well, let’s say you stay out tonight without permission, ergo, I give you detention for the rest of the week. During your detention you will, let’s see, you will--”

“Use Muggle cleaning methods to clean every trophy in the trophy room?”

She nodded. “Excellent.”

Harry grimaced. “Ron had to do it once. Wish I’d been with him; for my detention, I had to help Lockhart answer his fan mail...”

He thought he saw a smile playing around the corners of her mouth, but over the years, she’d become very good at suppressing such displays.

“Very well, we have a plausible story in hand. Now, Hagrid tells me you’ve had some contact with the creature--”

“He’s let me feed him, and I’ve flown on his back twice. But I have to make sure I don’t come down here with my snake...He tried to come after me once when I had her on me.”

“Well, naturally. That’s what a griffin *does*, Potter. Are you sure about this? Your lion is coming along. Not that I would have chosen an animal such as a lion to begin with. It’s not very inconspicuous.”

“I’m sure professor. It just feels so--right.”

She nodded. “I know what you mean. Those of us who are Animagi--we think *we* are choosing the animals, but I have always suspected that in a very real way, the animal actually chooses *us*.”

“And I’m not doing this to be inconspicuous. I feel more like--more like I’m arming myself for battle.” She nodded, understanding. Neither of them said the name they were thinking. “I just have one question, Professor: Isn’t it rather *cold* to be sleeping outside?” He shivered again. She smiled. “Did you think this golden griffin was sleeping in the cold? Really, Harry. We aren’t cruel to animals at Hogwarts. This isn’t Durmstrang. Griffins are from the Middle East and Northern Africa, originally. They like warm weather. The air inside the fence is magically heated. Just a little, during the day, when there’s sunlight. You may not have noticed it during your classes. We make it much warmer at night, when it’s dark. In a way, we do not need a fence or a wall to keep the griffin in; he doesn’t like to stray from the comfort of the enclosure. When you flew on him, how long was he in the air?”

Harry thought. “Maybe a couple of minutes, at most?”

“You see? He was anxious to get back to the warmth. And have you been doing the reading on griffins I was suggesting? Because you must know everything you can. I will be setting you an examination in one week.”

Boy, Harry thought. No one said there was going to be a written test. But he nodded at her.

“All right, then. In you go. Sleep well.”

She turned to go. “Professor! Has he, um--eaten lately?” He eyed the animal warily.

“Yes. Hagrid assures me that he had two-hundred pounds of raw mutton for his dinner.

Goodnight, Potter.” She turned and started walking back toward the castle. Harry shivered in the wind and turned to look at the griffin again. Oh, well, he thought. If that’s where it’s warm, I’d better get inside the fence.

He climbed over and landed on the spongy ground, immediately feeling a warmth envelop him, making him close his eyes in relief. It was like suddenly being transported to the tropics.

McGonagall wasn’t kidding. He approached the griffin cautiously. He’d never been near it when Hagrid wasn’t around. I’m supposed to bond with it, Harry thought.

He moved nearer to the sleeping animal, looking so much like a lion. He crouched down next to it, putting his hand on its flank, feeling the warmth emanating from it. There was also a low rumble traveling up his arm, making his entire body resonate with the purring of the griffin. Taking off his robe and balling it up like a pillow, he curled up on the ground next to it, feeling its breath on his back, feeling the purr taking over his brain. He stared into space for some time, since it was much earlier than he usually went to sleep. He turned onto his back, looking at how clear the stars were in the night sky, then he closed his eyes and tried to imagine flying through the air under his own power, tried to imagine being a golden griffin...

* * * * *

The detention ruse seemed to be working. After the initial night outside, McGonagall staged a scene which consisted of her reaming him out in front of the entire house. Harry grimaced and tried to look contrite about being out all night. She announced his sentence and left the common room, a place he'd only seen her a few times since coming to Hogwarts.

"Blimey," Ron said to Harry after she'd gone. "Staying out all night. What'd you go and do that for?"

Harry looked at Hermione, who was looking as triumphant as if she had turned him in. Harry shrugged. "It's hard to explain right now. Let's go eat breakfast." McGonagall had been good, he thought. Too good; he felt mortified by being called up on the carpet in front of everyone. He was a prefect, supposed to set an example, and so on.

Each night after that, he walked down to Hagrid's cabin to sleep in the enclosure with the griffin. After the first night, he used his Invisibility Cloak, so no one would see him walking across the grounds, even though it was dark. On Tuesday morning, he'd woken up to find a large paw draped over him, almost as though he were serving as some kind of stuffed toy for the creature. By Thursday night, he felt ready to try to transform, including wings.

He closed his eyes, concentrating hard, then feeling the rippling through all the bones in his body as he changed form, changed appearance. He landed on all fours, his enormous paws standing on the mossy earth beside the real griffin, and with an effort, he concentrated even harder and then expanded his wings on either side of him, turning to look at them as best he could, gold and gossamer and stronger than anything imaginable. He looked at the griffin. It was awake now, staring at him. Uh-oh, Harry thought. Would it be alarmed? Would it want to fight another griffin?

The griffin spread its wings too, and took a short run before leaping into the sky. Harry gasped and collapsed onto the ground; he'd held the form of the griffin for a good two or three minutes. That was a record for him. Unfortunately, if the real griffin thought he was going to attempt to fly with it yet, it was crazy. Harry had no interest in coming crashing down from the sky in his human form, needing to be carted off to the hospital wing for repair.

The griffin wheeled in a circle above him, then came back to earth. It cocked its head, looking at him, then reclined again, looking sleepy once more. Harry curled up next to it again, as had become their pattern, and fell into a deep sleep, trying to forget the painful transformation he'd just executed. He felt more like he *had* been executed, and someone had botched the job, like with Nearly Headless Nick. But as he leaned against the griffin, the warmth of the animal and the rhythm of its inner motor seeped into his body, and he was soon slumbering peacefully, the pain leaving him, as he dreamed dreams he would not remember....

* * * * *

It was Saturday morning before he received a reply to his letter to Sirius, plus a large package.

Hedwig nearly dropped the Pensieve on Ron's head as he sat next to Harry eating some kippers.

"Hey!" Ron yelled, spitting out the bite of fish he'd been chewing.

"Eeeew!" Ginny recoiled. She'd been reaching for a piece of toast and the half-chewed bite expelled from Ron's mouth had just barely missed her hand. Will Flitwick, sitting next to her, laughed into his orange juice and wound up snorting it through his nose. Amy and Andy Donegal held their stomachs, laughing uncontrollably at this chain reaction.

Harry caught the package, immediately understanding Hedwig's difficulty (and she was far from being as small as Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon). It was about eighteen inches square and almost a foot high. Harry shoved the box under the table and removed Sirius' letter from Hedwig's leg. Ron craned his neck to see, but Harry moved so he couldn't. Ron scowled.

Dear Harry,

Here is the Pensieve. Not as expensive as a Firebolt, but it comes close.

Oh dear, thought Harry.

We can discuss the cost later. You said you wanted to actually meet to talk with me. The best thing to do would be for you to be in the common room near the fireplace at one o'clock tonight. Until then---Sirius

He put the letter in his pocket and rose from the table, picking up the Pensieve, so he could take it up to his trunk. As he was leaving, Hermione stopped him.

"Harry!"

He turned, confused. So she was suddenly speaking to him again?

"Your shoes are untied," she said. He was holding the Pensieve on his right; she was on his left. He looked down; both of his shoes were tied securely. He looked up at her again. Hermione was putting something into her pocket.

"Made you look!" she said in a sing-song voice, turning back to her food. Harry rolled his eyes and resumed his course. Great. She's talking to me again for the sole purpose of trying to make me look and feel like an idiot. He left without a backward glance,

He had been waiting for a reply all week, which felt like it had dragged incredibly, but now the rest of the day seemed as long as the other five days put together, as Harry watched each minute tick by agonizingly slowly. He practiced Quidditch with the team, he read *The Tempest*, he played chess with Ron...

And, after the brief morning encounter in the Great Hall, he and Hermione gave each other a wide berth.

Harry was also relieved that he would be sleeping indoors again--although he couldn't actually sleep until he'd talked to Sirius. When at last, the few remaining stragglers left the common room, at about a quarter-to-one, Harry drew a breath of relief, going over to the fireplace and leaning back in a chair to wait for Sirius.

When he appeared, Harry jumped; he still wasn't used to this kind of communication. He was lucky he hadn't been caught in Snape's office, he was so surprised when Sirius' head had appeared in *that* fireplace.

Sirius smiled at him. "Hello, Harry. How are you?"

He looked tired, Harry thought. "All right. Thanks for sending the Pensieve."

"Would you mind telling me why you need one?"

Harry could not meet his eyes. "Well, I'm planning to give it to--a friend. As a present."

"I see." Sirius looked dubious. "That's some present."

“Well, it’s someone who really needs it. Has a lot of stuff locked up inside his head.”

“How do you even know what a Pensieve is?”

Harry grimaced. “Dumbledore has one. I--accidentally fell into it, and--”

“And are you planning to ‘accidentally’ fall into this one? Does this--friend think his thoughts will still be *his*?”

Harry looked at him guiltily. “It’s for Snape.”

Sirius looked shocked. “Now, that I did not see coming. Snape? You giving a Pensieve to Snape?”

“That’s not all. I have a confession. In October, when you called Snape in his office, I was there. In my Invisibility Cloak. I heard everything, about the Polyjuice Potion and about--about my mum and Snape, and the Malfoys, and Death Eater activity near the Weasleys’ village...”

“You were there!” Sirius looked furious. Harry thought he was furious at him, but he wasn’t. “If you were there, someone else could just have easily--oh, Harry, I’m not meaning to yell at you, it’s just--security--”

Harry looked down. “I’m sorry. When I slipped into his office, I didn’t know you were going to call him. I was so surprised I almost screamed when your face popped up in the fire. I’m lucky he didn’t give me a month of detentions. Please don’t tell him.”

“That Invisibility Cloak--” Sirius was muttering, shaking his head. Harry thought he must be remembering all of the antics his father had engaged in using the cloak. Harry wished he dared ask about some of that, but clearly this wasn’t the time.

“Sirius?” he ventured. “When you and Snape use the potion--be careful, okay?”

Sirius smiled at him again. “I promise.”

“I mean--Lucius Malfoy seems pretty ruthless. Even his own son--” he remembered the way Malfoy had looked on Monday, and shivered. And then he remembered Lucius Malfoy talking to Cho Chang at the Quidditch match, how she had looked so strange afterward, like she was in a trance...

He told Sirius about that, and Sirius widened his eyes. “Now that doesn’t sound good, Harry. What happened after that?” Harry reddened. “Well?” Sirius prompted him.

“After that we--we were--”

“What?” Sirius was getting impatient.

“Snogging,” Harry said in a very soft voice. Sirius suddenly burst out laughing. Then he shushed himself, still shaking with laughter.

“Sorry, Harry. I’m still getting used to you not being a baby, and here you are a teenager with hormones running amok. By the time I get used to that, you’ll probably be a grandfather.”

“That’s if I live to graduate from Hogwarts,” Harry said glumly. Sirius looked at him levelly again.

“Harry. I won’t hear that talk. You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend.”

“Um, yeah,” was Harry’s eloquent reply. He didn’t feel like going into the Viktor Krum Plan for Sirius. “I just wish I knew what he was saying to her. I mean, he doesn’t seem to just make idle chitchat.”

Sirius nodded, deep in thought. “I agree. He had to be doing it for a reason. And you probably can’t ask her; if she was placed under a spell, she’d be unlikely to remember anything. But you might want to be careful when you’re with her. Just in case. Make sure you have your wand at all times. Don’t let your guard down. Now, I know it’s hard to be vigilant and kiss a girl at the same time--”

“Sirius!” Harry laughed, reddening again.

“I know you’re laughing now, but think about it. A teenage boy--how better to get at him than going through a teenage girl?”

Harry nodded. “Actually, I have thought about it. You know, Hermione being kidnapped. I’ve wondered--whether she was placed under the Imperious Curse. Told to--do things--”

Sirius raised his eyebrows. “What sort of things?”

Harry looked away, embarrassed. “I’d rather not say. But it doesn’t matter right now, I suppose. We’re not speaking.”

“You and Hermione? Why?”

“It’s a long story--” What was he supposed to tell Sirius? That he’d been kissing Hermione, too? (Well, doing just a little bit more than kissing.) And that she’d tried to mash his foot after seeing him kiss Ginny? He didn’t want Sirius to think he was completely out of control, running around kissing every girl in sight.

“A messenger approaches,” Sandy hissed. Harry jerked his head up. A messenger? Who could that mean?

“Sirius. You’d better go. Someone’s coming. Thanks for everything. And don’t forget what I said about being careful.”

“You too.” And he was gone. The fire flickered normally once more. Harry sank back into the armchair, wondering who would walk in on him.

A few minutes later he had started to doze off. Suddenly, Hermione was crawling into his lap, putting her arms around his neck, pillowing her head on his shoulder. “Harry,” she whispered. He opened his eyes in surprise, not knowing what to say or do.

“Hermione!” was all he could think of, staring at her, shocked, putting his arms around her awkwardly. “Why are you--” But she handed him Sirius’ letter. He realized that she must have nicked it from his pocket when she pulled the shoe-lace stunt at breakfast.

She looked into his eyes intently; she seemed contrite. “I’m sorry Harry. I--I’ve been such a--”

He put his finger to her lips. “No. I should have told you about Sandy. But some of the other things--I really can’t tell you yet. Sirius doesn’t even know. But you will know. Eventually. I promise.” His voice became softer. “I’ve missed you.”

She smiled sadly. “Good. Now don’t ever do that again.”

He was perplexed. “Do what?”

She looked down. “Kiss Ginny.” She looked up at him again. “I know, I know. I should be more mature than that. You were in a crowd of people, she’d just won the game for the team--I never knew I could just erupt with jealousy like that--”

He smiled at her and tweaked her nose. “My foot will remember that for a while. That should keep me from straying, eh?”

She covered her face with her hands. “Oh, god, I didn’t mean to hurt you! I can’t believe I did that!”

He removed her hands from her face, lifting her chin with his finger. “You can make it up to me now,” he told her quietly.

Their lips met softly, tentative kiss after tentative kiss, putting off the deeper kiss they each wanted. Then Harry slowly opened his mouth, bringing his hand up and gently pulling her chin down, licking her lips and holding her face in his hands, taking his time. She trembled, sinking her fingers into his hair, pulling him to her, and now they were kissing properly, deeply. They’d never done this before, a slow, leisurely exploration of each other, no hurrying, no frantic

clawing at clothing. Harry broke the kiss slowly and leaned his forehead on hers.

“Promise me something?” he whispered. She nodded. “Next time you’re upset with me, just do the killing curse or something. Put me out of my misery quickly. I’ve seen what it’s like being your enemy. Definitely not something I ever want to repeat. No one crosses Hermione Granger.” He smiled at her. She looked down, starting to cry. “Oh, Hermione, don’t! I didn’t mean to--” but she couldn’t stop, and now she buried her face in his neck, and he could feel her tears on his skin.

He stroked her curls as she muttered through her sobs, “I’m so sorry, so sorry--” and when she was cried out, he heard her sigh. He held her tightly, leaning his cheek on her hair. Her breath warmed his neck. He felt so tired. He closed his eyes, just for a minute, he thought.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was stunningly bright, a white light glaring in through the windows. Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Harry had sat sleeping in the chair all night, still wearing his clothes and robes from the day before. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. Ron came hurtling down the stairs, stopping abruptly when he saw Harry.

“There you are! Thought you’d done something stupid again, like staying out all night.”

“Your confidence in me is underwhelming,” Harry replied sleepily.

“Go get changed! It’s the first snow! I’m glad it’s Sunday. I’d be going crazy if this were Monday and we had to go to Potions right now!” Harry smiled as Ron went to the window, gazing out at the snowy grounds. That explains the white light, he thought. Ron reminded him more of a five-year-old than a fifteen-year-old. He went up to his dorm, grinning. He thought of Hermione and felt a joy bound through him he hadn’t felt in a very long time. They were all right again. He thought of holding her in the chair, like she was a little girl. When had she gone upstairs? he wondered. It was a lucky thing Ron hadn’t found them like that. Not that it would have been too incriminating; they were both fully clothed, merely sleeping. But still..

They spent much of the day outside. It seemed like every student in the school had turned out to play in the snow like small children. Even Alicia Spinnet had foregone her Head Girl dignity to engage in a snowball fight with Angelina and the Weasley twins, which ended with everyone being pelted with self-propelled bewitched snowballs which, luckily, were a lot softer than Bludgers. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had conjured up ice-skates for themselves and were racing each other back and forth on the frozen lake. Some Slytherins decided to skate too, playing Crack-the-Whip, but Harry and Ron got Hermione and Ginny out of the way in time to avoid injury. Harry was momentarily alarmed by the fact that Crabbe and Goyle and Crabbe’s “little” sister were all on the ice at the same time; he was afraid it would break under the strain. But it held up fine, not even hairline cracks appeared. The only person he knew that he didn’t see was Malfoy.

Later, they all relaxed by the fire in the common room, drinking hot chocolate and toasting bread and muffins on sticks in the fireplace. They felt warm and cozy and content. Even Hermione did not suggest doing schoolwork. Ron had noticed as soon as Hermione had come downstairs that morning that she and Harry seemed to be back to normal, and when Harry confirmed this, he did not question it, merely looked relieved.

As the time approached for the evening meal, Harry went up to his dorm so he could be alone. He sat on his bed to write a short note on a piece of parchment.

“FOR SEVERUS SNAPE, FROM A FRIEND.

PERHAPS THIS COULD BE USEFUL FOR YOUR MEMORIES OF LILY.<>”

Harry wrote in upright block letters, in a style as unlike his usual handwriting as he could muster.

He folded the note and placed it under the knotted string that was around the box the Pensieve came in. Then he took his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk and put it in the pocket of his robes. Harry made it through the common room without anyone taking any notice of him except for Hermione. She smiled at him, raising his eyebrows.

He mouthed the words, *I'll be right back*. She nodded, and he left. Once in the corridor, he put on the Invisibility Cloak, holding the large box awkwardly with one hand. He made it down to the dungeons without meeting anyone and entered the Potions classroom.

Harry walked cautiously over to the door to Snape's office, meaning to place the box gently on the floor. Instead, it slipped from his grasp and struck the stone floor with a loud thud. Harry heard a firm tread, then the door to the office swung open abruptly. Snape started to step out into the classroom, but had to stop, because of the package sitting in the doorway. Snape narrowed his eyes, looking suspiciously around the room. As always, someone's eyes going right through him gave him a strange, queasy feeling. He dared not move or draw breath; if Snape had merely extended his arm for its full reach, he would have come in contact with Harry. Snape looked down at the package again. Seeing the note, he stooped to withdraw it from the string, as though he were avoiding touching the package itself. He read it, then looked around the room again, frowning. He took out his wand, and Harry was sure he was going to perform some charm to ferret out a person hiding in plain sight--but instead he levitated the package and caused it to float into his office. He was obviously still reluctant to touch it. Harry wondered if he would blow it up, like when the police found suspicious packages lying around airports that could be terrorist bombs. The office door closed with a bang and Harry exhaled noisily. He crept carefully back to the corridor and upstairs, dreading every moment that Snape would know that he had left it, and come dashing up to Gryffindor Tower to accuse him of some nefarious purpose for doing so. Harry took off the cloak in the corridor, stuffed it back into his pocket and climbed back through the portrait hole into the common room.

* * * * *

When almost everyone was done eating dinner that evening, Dumbledore stood at the head table and made an announcement.

"Wasn't this a nice day? I'm sure everyone had fun in the snow; I know I did." Harry smiled, remembering seeing Dumbledore sledding down the sloping lawn and ice-skating. Only a few other professors had indulged in winter sports, however. Professor Flitwick had helped his great-nephew and his friends build an enchanted snow fort and Professor Sprout had been using her wand to make beautiful ice sculptures that looked like some of the more exotic plants in the greenhouses. McGonagall had convinced Professor Vector to do some cross-country skiing with her, around the lake. It did not actually seem to involve magic.

"I'll bet it gave you all good appetites. Winter at Hogwarts! An enchanted time! And wait until you see the Christmas decorations this year! I hope each and every one of you will sign up to stay at school this Christmas; for those that do, there will be a treat." Harry grimaced; he hoped it wasn't another ball. That would be so complex, what with Cho and Hermione...and what if Malfoy wanted to take Ginny? He'd be visiting Ron in Azkaban for the rest of his life, after he killed Malfoy...

"The day after Christmas is, of course, Boxing Day. And this year at Hogwarts, we are going to have a *traditional* Boxing Day observance." Dumbledore looked around, as though waiting for the cheering to start. Harry noticed that Hermione was smiling broadly, looking like she would burst. He remembered her talking to Dobby about Boxing Day, when they were eating in the

kitchens. What was all this about? What had Hermione convinced Dumbledore to do? There was silence. “Ah, yes. Perhaps most of you are too young to remember what people used to do on Boxing Day. Traditionally, families that had servants switched places with them on that day. And that is what we will do here at Hogwarts this year on Boxing Day: the masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.”

Harry’s eyes opened wide and he turned to Hermione. She was positively glowing. *The snake’s prediction!* She had said she knew what it meant. It was about Boxing Day!

“So,” Dumbledore continued, “I hope that as many of you as possible will stay to enjoy this traditional observance of Boxing Day. Each of you may sign up in the entrance hall. Hurry! Only two weeks to Christmas! Now, enjoy your pudding,” he said, sitting again, preparing to dig into some trifle.

As they were walking back up to Gryffindor Tower, Ron turned on Hermione. “This was your idea, wasn’t it? Boxing Day?”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “What if it was?”

He sighed with exasperation. “When are you going to learn? The elves like their lives just the way they are. Just because you feel guilty--”

“Yes I do, Ronald Weasley, and so should you too! So should everyone here! We are all complicit in the perpetuation of a great injustice! Now, Dumbledore’s convinced them that this is a traditional thing, he’s gotten them to agree to be the ones who get waited on for one day. With any luck, once they get that little taste of freedom--”

“What? They’ll all jump ship? Hermione, I like my clean laundry just appearing in my wardrobe. I like the meals, the warm beds and clean sheets and all the rest. I’ve heard that in some Muggle schools, they make the *students* do chores like that. Is that how you want it to be around here?”

“That wouldn’t happen. Dumbledore will be making the elves an offer at New Year’s: any of them that want to will be given clothes and their freedom. If they want to continue to work here, they will get wages and time off. They won’t be property of Hogwarts anymore. I know that we’ll be lucky if even a handful decide to do it the first time, but I’m hopeful. It helps that Winky’s gone, of course. I am realistic, you know; I’ve decided that some elves will simply never want to be free. It’s just not the norm in their culture. But it’s time for an evolution in the culture...”

“You’ve decided that, have you? You know what’s best for everyone?”

Harry had had enough. He stepped between them. “All right. Hermione and I are okay again, and now you two are going at it? Is this really necessary? Each of you knows the other doesn’t agree about this. Can you both just let it drop?” He looked back and forth between the two of them. Ron backed up.

“This is partly your fault. You’re the one who freed Dobby.”

Harry sighed; now Ron was getting hacked off at *him*. “He was owned by the Malfoys! They made him beat himself up all the time!”

Ron shook his head. “Neither of you knows what it’s been like to grow up in a wizarding family that can’t *afford* house elves...” He turned and strode up the stairs, two at a time, his frayed robes billowing out as if to emphasize his words.

Harry turned to Hermione, who was looking crushed. He pulled her into an empty classroom and locked the door. “Hermione,” he said, holding her upper arms, “you know that what you did is wonderful, you know that, right? You’ve got such a good heart, you just can’t--” but

suddenly he couldn't go on talking because she had stood on tiptoe and pulled his mouth to hers. He hesitated for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her, holding her face up to his, tracing her jaw with his fingers, feeling her shiver at his touch. He broke the kiss and looked down at her, smiling.

"Just so we're in agreement. You're wonderful. Go that?" She nodded, coloring. They left the classroom, walking upstairs without touching, but Harry felt he was in the warmest embrace possible. He gave her another quick kiss and a smile before they entered the common room. She grinned back, with just a shadow of doubt behind her eyes. Harry hoped that loads of students would sign up to stay for Christmas break. He dreaded seeing the look in her eyes if they didn't...

* * * * *

During the next week, Snape spent a great deal of time in his office when they were having Potions. He would come out at the start of class, give them instructions, then shut himself in his office again and not emerge until near the end of the class, to check on their work. When it was just a few days before Christmas break, Harry went over to Neville's and Hermione's table to whisper to Neville, "What do you think Snape has been doing in his office for the last week-and-a-half?" Neville shrugged.

"I was down here once, doing some extra work, and I knocked on the door to ask him a question about a potion I was working on. He opened the door and he was sitting with a large stone bowl in front of him, holding his wand. The bowl had something white in it, but I also felt like I could see pictures floating in it. It was strange."

Harry smiled to himself. He was using the Pensieve. After classes, Harry came down to the dungeon again. He'd had another idea, thanks to the conversation he'd overheard between Snape and Sirius. He knocked on Snape's office door, heard him cry, "Alohomora!" and the door swung open.

"Oh. It's you, Potter." Harry stepped into the office, realizing that he had never done so before except for when he was under the Invisibility Cloak. He took note of the Pensieve on the desk, but then moved his eyes elsewhere, not to seem like he was focusing on it. "What is it?" Snape snarled without energy, as though he were too tired to be adequately nasty.

"Well, Professor, I've been thinking about this ever since the end of last term..." A lie, but a hopefully, a convincing one. "Perhaps it would be a good idea for there to be a Dueling Club again at the school. A real one, run by someone who knows what they're doing." Snape looked at him with a sneer.

"If you think the Headmaster has time to run a Dueling Club--"

"Oh, no. I know he's--quite busy. I was thinking of you." He registered the surprise on Snape's face. "Not that you're not busy, too. I didn't mean that," he added hurriedly. "It's just that, if you hadn't shown us the Disarming Charm..." He thought again of Voldemort, of their wands linking, forming the golden cage, the phoenix song...

"Then you and Weasley and Granger wouldn't have knocked me out in the Shrieking Shack," Snape said with another snarl, although it sounded somewhat forced now.

Harry grimaced. "Sorry about that. And thanks for covering for us. I've never said." Snape looked surprised yet again. He wasn't accustomed to Harry thanking him for anything. Harry remembered him saying to Sirius that Harry didn't even give him credit for saving his life. Harry also remembered Hermione whimpering, "We attacked a teacher...we attacked a teacher...Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble," when Snape had flown across the room and struck his

head against the wall. Snape could have had them all expelled.

"I thought," said Harry, "it would be a way for the students to be prepared. For what's to come. Now that Voldemort's back." Unlike with McGonagall, Harry didn't feel he needed to avoid saying Voldemort's name. And unlike many other wizards he knew, Snape didn't flinch at the name.

"Well," Snape said, considering this; or perhaps he was planning to admit that he had been in the wrong about Sirius; after all, the two of them were working together now, doing undercover work (you couldn't get much more undercover than using Polyjuice Potion). But Snape hadn't come that far yet. He stood and motioned to the door. "Come out here, Potter."

Harry frowned. What now?

But Snape had moved some tables out of the way with a flick of his wand. Now he held his wand out, pointing at Harry.

"What--" Harry began.

"We are going to duel. I want to see how you've come along since second year."

Harry remembered his brief duel with Malfoy during the first Dueling Club. He had used a tickling charm on Malfoy, but in the midst of it, Malfoy had managed to put a dancing curse on Harry's legs. After those spells had been canceled, Snape had whispered the snake-conjuring charm in Malfoy's ear, and Harry had discovered that he was a Parselmouth...

Harry took out his wand and faced Snape, trying to be as expressionless as he was. They bowed, then stepped back, each holding their wands like fencing foils. Harry tried not to blink. He saw Snape start to open his mouth, point the wand at Harry.

"*Expell--*"

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry cried, faster, pointing his wand at Snape, who suddenly seemed to be moving excruciatingly slowly, continuing to speak his incantation the whole time.

"*--i--ar--*" he said deeply, slowly, advancing on Harry still. Harry calmly walked around behind Snape, watching his slow progress with a smile.

"*--mus,*" Snape finished, as a burst of sparks flew out of the end of his wand, landing harmlessly on the stone wall opposite. Harry watched him continue to move in slow motion, then decided that was enough. He pointed his wand at Snape again, saying, "*A tempo!*"

Suddenly, Snape stumbled, moving at his normal speed again. He looked before him, his head whipping back and forth, not seeing Harry. Then he spun around, finally seeing Harry behind him. Harry was trying very hard not to look smug. Snape's eyes were very wide now. His wand arm was hanging by his side. He bowed to Harry again, and Harry bowed back. They each put their wands away.

"Well, Potter. Perhaps you should be the student captain of the Dueling Club." Snape said this without emotion, but to Harry this sounded like high praise indeed.

"Me, sir?" Harry felt he risked giving the impression that his voice hadn't changed after all, it came out so high. "All right, I suppose," he agreed nervously. Then he thought better of it.

"Wait--no. We should wait. See who signs up. Decide by having everyone duel everyone else in the club. See who has the best record."

Snape gave him another strange new look Harry had never seen: respect. He'd just been offered the position of captain of the Dueling Club and refused it, suggesting that whoever it was should earn it, not just have the idea for the club to begin with. Snape was clearly surprised.

"All right, Potter. I'll see the Headmaster about posting a notice and announcing it at the evening meal. If you'll excuse me, I was--in the middle of something."

“Of course, Professor,” Harry said, nodding. He turned to go. Before leaving the room he looked back for a second; Snape was looking at him strangely. Harry moved his eyes away quickly, moving swiftly out the door but trying not to seem like he was running.

When Harry arrived in the entrance hall with Ron and Hermione, preparing to go into the Great Hall for dinner, they found a throng of students clustered around what looked like a piece of parchment posted on the wall.

“Oh, good!” said Hermione, smiling. “Some more people signing up to stay for Christmas break!” She had been sorely disappointed that, thus far, only five students in the entire school had put their names on the list: other than Harry and Hermione, there was only Ernie MacMillan, Hannah Abbot and Roger Davies.

But Hermione was wrong; as they pushed their way through the crowd, they could see that there was a second parchment that had been posted beside the first, saying, “DUELING CLUB.” Nothing else was written on the parchment. George and Fred Weasley turned to Lee Jordan.

“You hear anything about this, Lee?” George asked him.

“First I’m learning about it.”

Roger Davies looked annoyed. “I’m Head Boy. Why haven’t I heard about it?”

Harry looked at him. “Because I just suggested it to Professor Snape this afternoon.”

“What?” Ron was incredulous. “Snape? Are you mental? He’ll turn everyone into hinkypunks or something.”

“Well, I thought he might actually know what he was doing. Could teach us a thing or two.

Hermione, can I use a quill?” She fished one out of her robes pocket and handed it to Harry, who wrote *Harry Potter* with a flourish, first name on the list. “It’ll be fun. And useful.”

As Harry was handing the quill back to Hermione, Ron grabbed it and stepped forward to put his own name down. Hermione was next. Then the quill was being passed from student to student, as more of them signed their names to the parchment. Harry and Ron walked into the Great Hall; Hermione waited to get her quill back, then joined them after a few minutes.

After most people were done eating and had started in on pudding, Dumbledore stood. “Good evening. I hope everyone has had a good meal. I have some exciting news for you all! I have given Professor Snape permission to start a Dueling Club. An attempt was made to have such a club several years ago, but it didn’t work out. Given the--current climate--it seems to be a good time to try this again. Professor Snape, would you like to say anything?” He turned to Snape with a smile. Snape stood slowly, looking out at the student population with an expression that reminded Harry of Moody, as though he were doubtful that any student at the school could duel his or her way out of a paper bag.

“The club will not meet until after the holiday. If you try to put anyone else’s name on the list except your own, you will not succeed; I have enchanted the parchment so that this is not possible.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Harry heard George say softly. “That must be why I couldn’t put your name on, Fred. You’ll have to do it later.”

“I suggest that any student interested in this activity spend the holiday doing research on appropriate charms and hexes. Only the first twenty students on the list will be accepted at the start; then, the four students with the worst dueling records will be dropped from the club, and the next four people on the list will be allowed to try. There will ultimately only be sixteen members of the club. But they will undoubtedly be the sixteen best duelers at Hogwarts.” Snape

looked around the room, as though doubting that such people existed.

“Also, only fourth years and up may join. Good evening!” He sat down again, looking intent on eating an apple tart, as though he hadn’t just made an extremely uncharacteristic announcement. Fred Weasley got up and raced to the entrance hall carrying a quill. He came back looking somewhat deflated. He sat down heavily again. “I’m twenty-one on the list. I’ll have to wait for the first lot to be sacked before I can join.” George looked very disappointed for him; it was unusual for the twins not to be doing everything together. (Well, there was Angelina, but she had started as a joint project as well.)

Harry smiled to himself, feeling very satisfied. The talk around them was all about the Dueling Club. He caught Hermione’s eye and winked. He hoped she would get over the whole Boxing Day debacle; maybe next year, more people would stay...And then he realized that unless *somebody* else signed up for Christmas break who was from Gryffindor-- He and Hermione would be alone in Gryffindor Tower.

* * * * *

Chapter Sixteen

The Christmas Party

On the last day of the term, Ron was to present his essay on *The Tempest*. Harry had done a passable job on his, but truthfully, he had found much of the play impenetrable. Hermione had written about Miranda, largely focusing on her exclamation, “*Oh brave new world!*” and Miranda’s new awareness of men. Moody liked it, but Hermione, Harry noticed, was very red during the entire time she was reading it, which she did in a rapid, high-pitched voice, racing through it so quickly, Harry wasn’t even sure he got all of it.

Ron was still working on his essay at two in the morning the night before, polishing it. Everyone else had gone to bed. Harry was keeping Ron company so he wouldn’t fall asleep. He had tried looking over Ron’s shoulder casually once or twice, to get a taste of what he’d written, but to no avail. Ron looked up at him calmly.

“I’ve put a charm on the parchment so only I can see what’s really on it. So sod off, Harry. I mean in a yes-you’re-still-my-best-friend way, and thanks-for-staying-up-with-me way, but all the same--sod off.”

“How’s Moody going to read it then?” Harry wanted to know.

“I’ll just take the enchantment off. Or--who knows? Maybe that weird eye of his can see through enchantments as well as walls, desks, clothes--”

“Invisibility Cloaks...”

Ron grinned at him. “Lucky for you the real Moody likes his sleep. But--can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Why did it take you four nights to clean the trophies when I did it in one night when I was twelve?”

Harry’s mouth was about to say something, but he realized he had no idea what, and shut it again. Then he had a thought, a question he’d been wanting to ask, and he decided to take a chance.

“Ron, if you could pick any girl in this school to be your girlfriend, who would it be?”

Now Ron jerked his head up. "What are you playing at, Harry? You didn't answer my question."

"If you answer mine, I'll answer yours."

Ron grimaced. "Harry, I'm not going to dignify that with--"

"Ron, just--okay. You probably know that I only asked because--I think I already know the answer."

Ron looked highly affronted, and raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you think so?"

Harry shrugged. "Prove me wrong."

Ron's face darkened. "Harry, I--" but he faltered. Then he got up and paced around the room, ran his hands through his bright red hair, at times looking like he was going to try to tear out a clump of it in frustration.

"I don't want things to *change*!" he finally choked out. "Why can't things just stay the same? Why?"

"Because they can't," Harry said quietly. He looked at Ron, whose breathing had increased as though he'd just run a marathon. "Why can't you just--just *tell* her?"

Ron lifted terrified eyes from the floor to Harry's face. "Because I can't. No. I can't."

"Why?"

"Why? Because she'd have to either say yes or no. And if she said no, what then?"

"What if she said yes?"

Ron looked at him sympathetically. "Then something else would change." Me, Harry thought. He's thinking of me, of my being left out.

"And what if she said yes," Ron went on, "but then it all went to hell? Then what?"

Harry shrugged again. "Then you would have tried."

Ron shook his head vehemently. "It's no good. No good! This is too soon. We're so young! Why can't we just--"

"--be twelve forever?" Harry finished. "It's about three years too late for that."

Ron looked at him miserably. "Why does it have to change?" he whispered.

Harry made a face at him. "You know, she won't wait forever."

Ron whipped his head around. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Harry looked him in the eye without quavering. "It means what it sounds like it means."

Ron looked at him shrewdly. "Why did you start asking me all this?"

Harry's gaze still did not leave his. "Call me stupid, or an optimist or something, but I thought that if I asked, I might actually get an answer. Shows what I know."

Ron still glared at him, as though he were trying to read Harry's mind. Then he went back to the table and gathered up his parchment, quills and ink and his anthology. He looked Harry in the eye again before beginning to climb the stairs to their dorm.

"This conversation never happened," he said, almost menacingly. Then he went swiftly up the stairs.

Harry stared after him, unbelieving. How could he be so stubborn? Harry wondered. The three of them had been inseparable since Halloween of their first year, when they'd saved Hermione from the mountain troll. But--two boys and a girl, they were getting older--something was bound to change.

Harry had hoped he could bring Ron around, get him to tell Hermione. Then Harry could bow out and stop feeling so guilty. But Ron had refused to grow up, to admit they were all growing up. Why did he have to be so difficult?

In the meantime--he was glad he'd told Ron that she wouldn't wait forever. Ron had been warned. Harry could continue with a clear conscience (almost). He had given Ron the perfect opening, and he'd refused it.

But something nagged Harry in the back of his mind, and then he realized what it was: Snape had told Sirius that his dad had been unable to tell his mum how he felt about her, but then he got over that and told her, and she'd left Snape for his dad. Was that going to happen to him? Harry wondered. If Ron finally said something, would she just go? He shook himself sternly, trying to stop that train of thought. *Stop it. Stop it.*

And then he realized--they'd been having a conversation all about Hermione, but--
Neither one of them had once said her name.

* * * * *

"Weasley!" came Moody's growl. Ron looked up. He'd been rereading his essay for the tenth time that day. He stood shakily and made his way to the front of the class. He sounded oddly detached as he spoke the words only he could see on the parchment:

"Ariel and Caliban are two sides of the same coin: Prospero. Ariel is the personification of Prospero's nobler side, striving for knowledge, eschewing physical comforts and political ambition. Caliban is his baser side, expressing the same rage, jealousy and desire for revenge over Prospero's usurping his rights on the island as Prospero expresses to Miranda when describing Antonio's usurping the dukedom of Milan.

"They are both his slaves, and when each complains of this, Prospero is swift to anger and remind them of why he deserves gratitude and service, not resentment.

"And, for thou wast a spirit too delicate

To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands,

Refusing her grand 'hefts, she did confine thee,

By help of her more potent ministers,

And in her most unmitigable rage,

Into a cloven pine; within which rift

Imprison'd, thou didst painfully remain

A dozen years.

"It is as though Prospero is describing himself and his own twelve-year imprisonment. He was 'a spirit too delicate/To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands' (the great goddess Politics). His cloven pine was his library in Milan, then the rotten ship, and finally, the island.

"But Ariel is not yet free because Prospero is not free. He is the slave of his baser instincts--his jealousy, rage and desire for revenge, not to mention incestuous desire for his daughter. This side of Prospero (personified in Caliban) must be enslaved by him so that he can attempt to avoid it ruling him.

"Prospero wants Caliban to be grateful for his having educated him and civilized him, but it is clearly as successful as if he had tried to teach his own penis to read. Perhaps this was the point to Prospero's bookishness in Milan."

Parvati suppressed a giggle and Hermione was deep red. Lavender was staring at Ron with her mouth open, her lips moist, her eyes glazed. Ron read on, oblivious.

"His condemnation of Caliban's trying to rape Miranda smacks more of jealousy than fatherly protection, and in fact, the anger is probably aimed more at himself than Caliban, in an attempt to keep his own errant desires under control.

“Ariel serves Prospero’s spiritual needs: he sings, plays tricks on people’s minds, and is usually invisible--not quite of this world. Caliban serves Prospero’s physical needs--making fires and fetching wood, providing food and other comforts. Caliban’s physical presence is the antithesis of Ariel’s; he is called a monster. He lives up to his title obligingly. Prospero no longer denies his need for physical comforts, as he did when glued to his books in Milan, but he doesn’t like it, either.

“In the end, Prospero shows every sign of returning to the purely intellectual life that led him to lose touch with other humans to begin with. Ariel is released from service because Prospero will now play that role himself. Caliban is also released, but it seems to be because, even after twelve years, Prospero has never come to terms with this part of himself, and probably never will.”

The class clapped tentatively. The girls all looked dazed. Parvati was fanning herself with a piece of folded parchment, sweat glistening on her upper lip. Hermione was quite scarlet, and her breathing didn’t seem quite normal. Lavender simply looked hypnotized.

Moody stamped his wooden leg on the floor. Right, thought Harry. Repression, big time. Ron really knew what he was talking about--he was the walking, talking personification of repression. It was his hobby.

And yet--the effect that his frankly-worded essay had had on the girls was remarkable. They all looked as unrepressed as Harry had ever seen them. He strongly suspected that if no one else had been present, they would have all ripped Ron’s clothes off and attacked him.

Moody’s response to Ron’s essay was cryptic. “Excellent!” he said in a bark. “Gives us all plenty of food for thought.” *That’s for sure*, thought Harry. *That’s for sure*.

* * * * *

They all returned to the common room after class. Ron’s essay went right out of Harry’s head as a ripple of excitement traveled through the students gathered there. Harry couldn’t make out what was going on, the talk was an unintelligible babble. Finally, he noticed that slips of parchment were being passed through the crowd. They must have been magically duplicated, for they all said the same thing:

**CHRISTMAS
PARTY! PARTY! PARTY!
Saturday, 23 December
No. 2 Floor Alley
Hogsmeade
(Katie Bell’s Great Aunt’s House)
10 am - 4pm
UNSUPERVISED
DO NOT TELL THE STAFF
BYOB
(Bring your own butterbeer)**

“A party, eh?” George said, putting his arms around Angelina’s waist. “Unsupervised?” he whispered in her ear, but not very softly. Angelina looked him in the eye.
“Then I take it you want to go?” she said, a mischievous tone in her voice.
“Try and stop me,” George said, grinning. Angelina put her arms around his neck.
“Not on your life.” She kissed his ear and it looked like that was just going to be the beginning. Fred threw a cushion at them. “Get a room!”

Angelina threw back her head and laughed throatily. "We plan to!"

Harry felt himself coloring. Oh. It was going to be *that* sort of party. He looked sideways at Hermione. She wasn't looking in his direction. He turned the other way toward Ron, who was holding one of the parchments, staring at it and looking as though he were trying to swallow a Bludger.

All anyone could talk about the rest of the afternoon was the party. Harry and Ron were playing chess while Hermione watched. They were all trying very hard to ignore the party talk. Then suddenly, Harry opened his eyes very wide; he could take Ron's queen! He looked at the board again. Ron had clearly moved the queen to take the bishop he'd had protecting his king. And if he took the queen with his bishop, would he then be vulnerable? Harry checked; Ron's knight was nearby, but it would take--he counted carefully--six L-shaped moves for it to take his king. It was only two diagonal squares away, but luckily, it couldn't be moved diagonally. Whereas, if Harry took Ron's queen--he would have Ron's king in his sights.

Harry smiled, moving the bishop forward and taking the queen. She left the board kicking and screaming. He looked up into Ron's eyes.

"Check."

Ron stared at the board; his king was protected by a bishop on the black square next to the king. He couldn't touch Harry's bishop with it. There was also a knight directly in front of the king, which Ron now directed to move one square away from the king and two over, so it was in the path now between Harry's bishop and Ron's king.

"Just cannon fodder, that's all I am, completely expendable..." the knight muttered as he moved to his new position. Harry immediately took him with his bishop and said again--

"Check."

Ron furrowed his brow. Hermione stared at the board, then stood up excitedly.

"No, Harry, it's not check. It's checkmate! You--you've won, Harry!"

Harry and Ron both stared at the board. Ron's king, if he didn't move, was going to be taken by Harry's bishop. If he did move it, the king would be taken by either one of Harry's knights or Harry's queen. Hearing Hermione's declaration, Ginny came over, followed by Seamus, Fred, Lee, and others. Ron looked up, surprised to see so many people around them.

"Well," he said flatly. "I suppose it was the beginning of the end when you took my queen."

Harry felt as though he had killed Ron. He tried to get Ron to meet his gaze but he refused.

"Wow, Harry, how long have you been trying to beat Ron?" Seamus laughed.

"Way to go, Harry," said George.

"SHUT UP!" Harry said suddenly, louder than he had meant to. Everyone had been muttering and laughing and talking excitedly about the game and the party--but now there was total silence. Sometimes, Harry thought, it pays to be the Boy That Lived. He rose and went to the portrait hole without looking at anyone. When he was in the corridor, he could only walk two steps before he had to lean against the wall and sink down onto the cold stone floor, his head in his hands. He was going to lose Ron. He knew it. He was going to lose his best friend.

....when you took my queen....

Suddenly, the portrait hole opened. Ginny climbed out.

"Oh, Harry, there you are. I'm glad you didn't get very far. Are you all right?" She sat down next to him. He sighed and looked at the ceiling.

"No, not really."

She hugged her knees, rested her chin on them. "Hmm. that's different. Most people say yes

whether they are or not.”

“I’m not feeling like putting a pretty face on things, just now,” he said irritably, looking down at his hands.

They sat in silence for a while. He’d felt at first that he really just wanted to be alone, but now he was grateful for her presence beside him, just being. Then, she spoke softly.

“You know, Harry, I never thanked you--”

“For what?” he said, sounding more snappish than he’d planned. Evidently, Ginny decided to overlook this.

“For suggesting that I send that owl to Draco. The day after the match. He really needed me, but he was afraid to ask me to come...”

“He wasn’t afraid to keep you in the Potions Dungeon all afternoon,” Harry grumbled in a low voice.

“Oh, we weren’t in the Potions Dungeon.”

Harry jerked his head up. “I expressly told him he could only see you in the Potions Dungeon--”

“When I sent the owl,” Ginny interrupted him, “I watched to see where it flew. It went directly to the hospital wing. I sat with him by his bedside, and I read to him.”

All Harry could say to that was, “Oh.”

Ginny sighed and nodded. “Madam Pomfrey had to give him a lot of painkillers. And this syrup she makes from fig leaves, for the bruising.”

“Bruising?”

“On his arms. His dad wasn’t too happy about the match.”

Harry frowned. “What did his dad do?”

“The Passus Curse. It’s a little like the Cruciatus Curse, but it’s legal. Not as painful. And you can’t just point your wand at someone and say ‘*Passus.*’ You have to combine it with a specific body part or organ, like ‘*Brachio suo passus est.*’ And it doesn’t last that long--only for a few seconds. It’s a bit like being stabbed or poked really hard in the name area. But if you do it repeatedly--like Draco’s dad did--you can get quite a lot of bruising and the pain can really accumulate.”

Harry grimaced. “That’s why he wants Moody to get around to teaching us mind-body separation.”

She nodded. “He mentioned that.”

Harry looked at her for a moment, perplexed. “I guess I just don’t understand, Ginny. How you two even became friends, let alone--”

“More.”

“Yes.” Harry paused. “Um, Ginny--how much more?”

She wouldn’t look at him. “Only a little more.”

“He isn’t--pressuring you--”

She looked up at him now. “No, Harry. We’re both aware of the fact that the wizarding age of consent is fifteen...”

He was still concerned. “And is he aware of the fact that you’ll be fifteen in a few months?”

She looked away again. “We haven’t discussed it. We’re--not anywhere near ready to discuss such things, Harry. Trust me, please? I can take care of myself. I would never let someone talk me into doing something I don’t want to.”

Harry put his hand on her arm. “This is Draco Malfoy we’re talking about.”

“You say that like you know him, Harry. You don’t. Maybe--maybe no one does...”

She looked at the wall now, as though focusing on something blank would help her to concentrate, to remember all the details.

“It was the beginning of term. After Herbology, I was helping Professor Sprout take some spleenwort plants up to the hospital wing. She said it was for Madam Pomfrey to make Prophylaxis Potion, whatever that is. She was acting strangely, said she thought Madam Pomfrey shouldn’t just go doling it out to any girl who asked. Then she looked at me and said that of course, I was a good girl, I would never need it. I haven’t bothered to look it up, though I meant to.”

Harry remembered that they had covered spleenwort in Herbology in October; it was generally used for making medicines for liver and spleen ailments, but such medicines could only be used for men because it was believed to cause barrenness in women. It didn’t really, not permanently, but Harry could guess what the Prophylaxis Potion was for, if Sprout was talking about Pomfrey giving it out to girls.

“Anyway, when we got to the infirmary with our levitating trays of spleenwort, there was Draco sleeping in one of the beds--he was the only patient--and he had this awful look about him. I couldn’t see anything wrong with him, but he was wincing in his sleep when he moved. Professor Sprout had left, and Madam Pomfrey was arranging the spleenwort in her office. I was about to go when he cried out in his sleep.”

“Did he say anything about how he’d gotten hurt?”

“Not exactly. He said--he said--”

“What?”

“Mummy.”

Harry laughed, and so did Ginny, a little, but then he could see she was making herself stop.

“Now, Harry,” she chided him. “We all do that. I’m sure you’ve--you’ve cried out for your mother.”

Harry sobered, looking down and then up at her again. “Too right.”

“At any rate, he seemed to--to need someone so. I went over to him. He was saying ‘Mummy’ over and over, and then he said, ‘Make him stop, Mummy.’ I took his hand and shushed him, told him Mummy was there. He settled down again, went back to sleeping more peacefully. He never opened his eyes, never knew his mum wasn’t really there. After a while I took his hand out of mine and left. He looked so--”

“Please don’t say cute or handsome or sweet or anything, I won’t be able to eat for a week.”

“--lost. Alone,” she finally said.

“So if he never knew you were there, I still don’t understand how--”

“Well, we always seemed to turn up in the Potions Dungeon at the same time to do extra work. I--I admit I was sneaking looks at him while I worked. After that day in the hospital wing, I was--curious about him. He was usually pretty nasty to me, actually. Called me Weasley, made snide remarks about our family being poor. You know. Vintage Draco Malfoy.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Finally, one day I lost it. I said to him, ‘Well, at least my dad doesn’t put me in hospital, and if I were in hospital, my real mum would come and hold my hand.’” She smiled. “He didn’t know what I was on about. Told me I was mad. I told him I’d been up there when he was crying, ‘Mummy, Mummy. Tell him to stop, Mummy,’ and that I’d held his hand and told him his mum was there. He looked shocked. ‘That was you?’ he said. But I was so angry with him, I

couldn't stop somehow. I told him that in *our* family, which he was always insulting, we looked out for each other, we weren't afraid to express our feelings--"

Harry made a face, looking away from her so she couldn't see. He thought of Ron.

"I asked him who did he think he was, why was he so insistent on making people think he had no feelings, no soul? I said, 'No wonder no one likes you.' As soon as I'd said it, I wanted to bite my tongue. I couldn't believe I'd said such a thing. He looked--I felt so dreadful for making him--for making *anyone*--look like that. And he just said, 'Well, you've expressed your feelings all right,' and he left."

"Whew!" Harry exhaled. "Nothing like making friends with someone by getting into a huge row."

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say we were friends at that moment. But the next time we were both in the dungeons at the same time--he was civil to me. We talked about our work, and what we were doing in classes. A real conversation. He *laughed*, and it wasn't at someone else's expense. Something had changed, somehow. We were on our way to being friends. And now..."

She stopped, stared into space, then a smile crept over her face and she colored slightly. "You know what I was reading to him, the day after the match?"

"What?"

"The Wind in the Willows."

Harry laughed. "You're kidding."

"Not a bit," she still smiled. "He always likes to read Wind in the Willows when he's laid up sick."

Harry thought for a moment. "Well, I can see him identifying heavily with Toad. Toad Hall would be the equivalent of Malfoy Manor, I suppose." He looked closely at her. "What do you read when you're sick?" he wanted to know.

"That's the interesting thing--like Draco, I like to read a children's book. I've always been partial to The House at Pooh Corner. I always felt a kinship with Piglet, somehow..."

"Piglet?"

She stood up. "Don't laugh at me." She checked her watch. "We should go to dinner before the stampede. What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Your favorite children's book."

Harry looked down, then up at her. "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." He started to stand awkwardly, but then she put out her hand and helped him up. She nodded knowingly.

"Charlie's family was dreadfully poor, but he *had* a family--"

"Two parents, four grandparents." Harry grinned.

"That's probably the last book Ron would choose," Ginny said. "Now Hermione's would probably be--Matilda."

"Spot on! And it's a good book, but those Wormwoods--" Harry looked like he'd just eaten an Every Flavor Bean tasting like dung.

"Bit too much like the Dursleys? I suppose then that you didn't like James and the Giant Peach?"

"Oh, not at all. I quite like the part where the peach rolls right over Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. After Dudley started his diet last year, I had some similar fantasies about my aunt and uncle and a giant grapefruit..."

They both went down the stairs to dinner laughing.

* * * * *

The train from Hogsmeade wasn't leaving until five o'clock, so the students who were going on the last Hogsmeade visit of the term sent their luggage down to the train station after breakfast. Hermione had had Harry invite Cho to the party during dinner the previous evening. She had sent an owl to Viktor, giving him the address of the cottage where the party was to be held. They would have another opportunity to put the two of them together. It was largely a Gryffindor party, but some students from other houses would be there. Harry hoped he could spend as little time as possible with Cho Chang.

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Cho walked down to the village along with the other Gryffindors going to the party, except for the Chasers from the Quidditch team. Alicia and Angelina went to the village before breakfast with Katie to help her get the cottage ready. When they arrived at Katie's great aunt's house, it seemed very quiet. (Her great aunt was in America visiting her grandchildren for Christmas.) The cottage had a charming front garden, even covered with snow, and swags of evergreen and holly were draped across the turquoise-blue-painted wooden fence separating the garden from the lane. Hermione knocked on the red-painted Dutch door with a large boxwood wreath on it, as Harry wondered whether they had the right house, but the moment Katie opened the door, the noise that spilled into the lane confirmed that they had found the party. Must have put a silencing charm on the house, Harry thought.

The noise thus far was largely from the Wizarding Wireless Network being turned up very loud, but there was also the bustling coming from the kitchen, where Alicia and Angelina were laughing loudly. Soon the noise was largely from the small living room of the house being filled with rowdy teenagers all jostling to get a good seat, although Fred grabbed Katie and began dancing to a fast number on the wireless, and refreshments began to be passed around, despite the fact that they'd all just finished breakfast.

Harry felt like his head was whirling. Hermione sat next to Ron, who was looking rather protective. Viktor hadn't arrived yet. Cho was clinging to Harry's arm, making him want to pry her hands from him, and he thought Ginny was looking around in a strange way. He saw her slip into the kitchen, looking like she hoped no one else had noticed.

Suddenly, another crowd of people spilled in the door, including a hunch-shouldered Viktor, as well as Ernie MacMillan with his arm around Hannah Abbot, and Roger Davies escorting-- Harry had to rub his eyes, he couldn't believe it--Fleur Delacour. Harry was still in shock as she came rushing over to him, pulled him away from Cho into an embrace and firmly kissed him twice on each cheek, in rapid succession.

"Arry! 'Ow are you? Ah, I see you are doing quite well, yes?" she said, eyeing him up and down in a way that made him color deeply. "The leetlest champion eez growing up, n'est-ce pas?"

Harry caught Cho's face out of the corner of his eye. She was not pleased. Good, thought Harry. Let the beastly behavior begin.

Then he caught a glimpse of Hermione's face; also not pleased. Well, I hope she does a better acting job than that, he thought. Viktor was greeting her now with a kiss on the cheek. He pulled her off the settee where she'd been sitting with Ron, who scowled, but then Fleur had seen Ron too, and she threw herself into the spot Hermione had just vacated, also kissing him twice on each cheek. Ron's ears were bright crimson. He appeared to have forgotten about

Hermione, who was now reacting poorly to Ron's being kissed. But then, Harry thought, she never liked Fleur. After all, Ron *did* get up the nerve to ask her out, even though she didn't accept. This might turn out to be a very interesting party, Harry thought.

Fleur returned to Harry and Cho, Roger on her arm. "So," Harry said to her. "What are you doing here, Fleur?"

She tossed her cornsilk hair over her shoulders and bestowed an indulgent smile on him. "I am teaching now at ze village school. Because I am ze youngest teachaire I am teaching ze most *petite* children, yes? I am eemproving my English since I am coming to live in Hogsmeade. My seestair Gabrielle is also going to ze village school. Eef I am still here in a few years, she will of course attend 'Ogwarts instead of Beauxbatons. I would *naturalment* prefer to be as close to 'er as possible."

"Of course," Harry said feebly, but then another influx of guests from the front door turned the room into a crowded mass of bodies, and they were separated from Roger and Fleur. People were laughing and talking and drinking butterbeer, the center of the floor given over to dancing. Harry, Hermione, Cho, Viktor and Ron were in a cluster. Viktor and Cho were talking Quidditch and Harry and Hermione were talking about which teachers they thought would be willing to do which chores on Boxing Day.

A slow song came on the wireless, and Harry jumped when a small pale hand appeared on his arm. Alicia was standing at his elbow. The room seemed very dark; the sky outside was already cloudy, and the curtains in the room were drawn. There were only a few candles for illumination.

"Harry--would you like to dance?" Alicia was asking him. Harry stared at her in shock. I'm being beastly to Cho today, he reminded himself.

"Oh--er, yeah. Sure." He thought, Smooth, Potter. Real smooth.

He and Alicia moved into the middle of the mass of dancing bodies. He placed his hands around her waist and she put her arms around his neck, resting her cheek on his chest. She was even shorter than Hermione, he realized. Somehow, when she was being Head Girl, she seemed--larger. He felt her breath through his shirt and her fingers tickling his neck. He prayed for the song to end soon--although he saw that Cho looked none too pleased. Good. Think dreadful things about me, think I'm a cad. Go ahead.

Harry saw Hermione whispering to Viktor, who was bending down to put his ear near her mouth. Harry grimaced over Alicia's head. But then he understood what was happening: Viktor leaned over to say something to Cho, and then the two of them walked toward the dancing throng, and Viktor and Cho put their arms around each other, increasing the number of dancers by two. Yes! thought Harry. Thank you, Hermione.

But Harry was starting to get a little alarmed about Alicia. What was she doing with her hands? Then to his relief, the song was over and Harry turned to see Katie looking up at him.

"Dance, Harry?" He agreed, and Alicia went off looking sulky. He saw that Viktor was dancing with Cho again. Ron was then pulled onto the dance floor by Parvati--or was it Padma? Harry wasn't sure. He lost track of Hermione, then he saw her over near the narrow staircase leading to the bedrooms. She looked him in the eye, then turned to climb the stairs.

When the song ended, he deflected yet another invitation to dance and made his way through the crowd to the staircase. He held onto the railing convulsively, acutely aware of the splintery wood beneath his hand, a large lump in his throat which he could not swallow. Turning for a moment, he saw that Viktor and Cho were dancing to a third song. He went back to climbing

the stairs. At the top he found Hermione, smiling broadly at him. He kissed her quickly on the cheek.

“Viktor and Cho are still dancing,” he told her.

“Good. Gives us a chance to be alone.” Harry looked around uncertainly at the plethora of doors opening off the small irregularly-shaped landing. He realized that the house was probably magically larger inside than out. From the front, one wouldn’t expect to find more than two rooms upstairs, three if the bathroom were counted. He also wasn’t sure they should be sneaking off to a bedroom in the midst of the party--that night on the hearthrug, he felt like anything could have happened....

But Hermione was pulling him toward a door with glass panes in it that had a red brocade curtain hanging on the other side. She opened it, revealing a book-lined study with a generous bay window containing a couch, on which Ernie MacMillan and Hannah Abbott were writhing and kissing.

“Aaack!” Hermione choked out. “Sorry!” she said hastily, shutting the door before she could be verbally attacked by Hannah and Ernie.

“Um,” she said to Harry, “you open the next one.” He laughed at the look on her face. He moved two doors down, past the one labeled LOO, which he deemed it unwise to monopolize. He tapped gently on the door first, and, receiving no answer, opened it cautiously.

It was a bedroom, a larger bedroom than the cottage had any right to hold, with a sitting area near some leaded-glass windows and a large four poster with a brightly-colored patchwork crazy quilt. In the bed was George Weasley.

“George!” Harry cried, before he could stop himself. He hadn’t opened the door very much, and Hermione, behind him, could not see into the room.

George was under the quilt, leaning back against the pillows, not wearing anything from the waist up. Harry doubted whether he was wearing anything from the waist down, either. When he opened the door, George had his eyes closed, an expression both happy and agonized on his face. His muscular shoulders, chest and Bludger-whacking arms were as generously freckled as his face, the skin pale beneath the spots, but growing more and more flushed with each moment. When Harry said his name, George’s eyes flew open and he cried out. Suddenly, Angelina’s head popped up from under the covers. Harry looked at her in surprise, her bare shoulders smooth and dark as Belgian chocolate.

“Oh, George, I didn’t hurt you, did I?” she asked, quite concerned. Then she turned and saw Harry in the doorway.

“Oh, hello, Harry,” she said, as though this happened every day. “If you’re looking for the loo, it’s the next door over, the one labeled LOO. Can’t miss it.”

She dove under the quilt again, and George threw back his head, a low groan beginning in his throat, growing louder and louder. Harry still stood in the doorway, frozen, mesmerized. George opened his eyes again, and on seeing him still standing there cried, “Sod off, Harry!” at which point Harry woke up and abruptly slammed the door.

He and Hermione looked at each other, each feeling the giggles coming on. Hermione stuffed her fist in her mouth, her eyes watering with mirth. Harry pressed his mouth into a line, holding his stomach, closing his eyes with the effort of not laughing out loud.

When they felt almost under control they crept to the next door. It was locked. So were the next three. Then a door revealed narrow, steep stairs going down and a collection of noises that sounded like they were coming from the kitchen. Back stairs, thought Harry. He moved on.

Then Harry felt a knob give way. He stopped and tried rapping on the wood first, before just opening it. There was no answer. Not that that did any good last time, he thought. When people are preoccupied...

He opened the door cautiously, peered around the edge, made a sound like, "Eergh!" in the back of his throat and closed the door, leaning against it as if afraid that Hermione would insist upon opening it again.

"Harry?" she whispered. "What is that room?"

"Linen closet."

"And? Who's in there?"

"Justin Finch-Fletchley."

She frowned at him. "Well, he's not alone, is he?"

Harry opened his eyes wide. "No."

Hermione waited. "Well? Who's he with?"

Harry felt suddenly impish. "Guess."

"Okay--Lavender."

"Nope."

Lisa Turpin."

"Cold."

"Susan Bones."

"Colder."

"Pansy Parkinson."

Harry made a face. "He's not blind, deaf and dumb, Hermione."

She laughed. "All right, I give up."

"Well--it's that sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect--oh, what's the name..."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "The sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect is Cho. We left her downstairs with Viktor, unless she's learned to Apparate--"

"The *other* sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect."

A sudden wave of understanding swept over Hermione's face. "Ooooh! It's--oh, drat, what's his name again? He's nice. They'd make a really cute couple."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. Meanwhile, I have to say--getting a bit tired of this. One last try, and then back downstairs, before someone comes up and wants to know why we're lurking about in the corridor."

She agreed, and they moved on to another door. Taking a deep breath, Harry simply opened it. The room that met his eyes was a long conservatory, all manner of exotic and magical plants growing in planters of all sizes. The planters lined the edges of the long, narrow space, which had a tile walkway leading down the center of the room like a corridor. It culminated in a seating area about thirty feet from the door which had a wicker loveseat, where two people were kissing.

It was Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley.

He closed the door quickly, before Hermione could see.

"What?" she said, just a slight whine in her voice.

"Go back downstairs," he told her. His voice was hard. She frowned.

"Harry--"

"It's occupied. Go back downstairs. We can't go together, you know that. I'll wait a few minutes before I follow."

She sighed and kissed him quickly on the lips. "Oh, well," she said, turning to go. When her head had disappeared down the stairs, Harry went back into the conservatory, locking the door magically, then striding the length of the room to the oblivious kissing couple.

He stood before them. Both of them had their eyes closed; Malfoy had one hand around her waist, the other sunk into her luxurious hair while she clasped her hands around his neck, her face turned up to his as he devoured her mouth. Harry tried to stem the tide of anger growing in him.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat.

Malfoy whipped his head around in shock.

"Potter!"

Ginny's mouth was open; she was speechless, and coloring deeply. Harry looked back and forth between them, his jaw clenched, telling himself he would *not* reach for his wand.

"How did you two get up here?" he demanded. "The last time I saw you, you were going into the kitchen," he said to Ginny.

"Back stairs," she said simply in a quiet voice. Harry stared back and forth between the two of them again, still trying not to reach for his wand. Instead, he pulled the basilisk amulet out of his shirt and held it out.

"Ginny! Why did you give this to me?"

She looked flummoxed. "Be--because when I was in first year, you saved me. From the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets."

Malfoy's mouth hung open stupidly. "What? There was a basilisk down there? And Potter--" "I killed it. When I was twelve." He glared at Malfoy, who was the one trying to swallow a lump now.

"They never told us..."

"No. That was to protect Ginny, so no one would know she'd opened the Chamber." Malfoy looked at her in surprise. Harry went on. "She opened the Chamber because she was under the influence of the diary of Tom Riddle--which *your* dad gave her, Malfoy. Your dad almost got her killed."

He watched this register on Malfoy's face, who looked desperately at Ginny, as though afraid she would suddenly decide to tell him off. Harry went on.

"Having saved Ginny's life," he said to Malfoy, "I feel somewhat responsible for her. I love her--" he said, his voice cracking a little (while Ginny's eyes became very wide) "--like a sister." He looked at Ginny, aching that he'd just said that--but knowing he had no choice but to convince all of them--himself most of all--that it was the truth.

"You know that your families will never consent to your being together. You know that one of you will have to turn on your family if you want this. I've decided that it will be you, Malfoy."

Draco Malfoy was staring at him as though he'd never heard of or seen Harry Potter before in his life. "What?" he finally said, at a loss for words.

"You will convince your father to take you into his confidence. You will learn all you can of the plans of the Death Eaters, your father in particular. You are going to put your own father in Azkaban."

"Harry!" Ginny was shocked. Both Harry and Malfoy looked at her as though she were incidental to the entire conversation.

"Ginny," Malfoy said to her softly. "Could you wait over by the door, please?"

She opened her mouth to protest, but she looked at Harry and he nodded at her. She strode

angrily over to the door to the conservatory, then leaned against it, her arms crossed, looking extremely put out.

Then Malfoy turned his back to her and said quietly to Harry, "Listen, Potter. Ginny doesn't know yet, but that--that was a good bye kiss. I was just about to break up with her."

It was Harry's turn to be surprised. "What?"

"Shut up! I was going to tell her--tell her that after Christmas break, I was going to be a different person, a person who couldn't be with her anymore--" his voice faltered, but then he cleared his throat and straightened up. Harry looked at him shrewdly for a moment, then he had a flash of brilliance.

"So *that's* what's going to happen on Christmas night..." he said slowly. Malfoy's eyes were wild.

"How do you know about that?"

Harry smiled enigmatically. "I have my sources. So. You're going to be a Death Eater, so you're breaking up with Ginny. How noble of you. Except that it won't work."

"What? What won't work?"

"Breaking up with her. You think that means you won't care about her anymore? Think again. When Voldemort--or your dad--comes after her again, or someone else in her family, what are you going to do? Sit back and say, 'Oh, well, I don't care about her anymore. I broke up with her.'"

Malfoy's face darkened. "I can't be with her if I have--that thing on my arm. This is what I was raised to be. This is what my father says I was destined to do."

"And as recently as last June you were looking forward to it, weren't you? I remember what you said on the train. But then--you had nothing to lose. Now you've got Ginny to lose. Now you've got someone in your life who actually cares what happens to you." Malfoy set his jaw stubbornly, refusing to look at him. Harry went on, whispering fiercely. "Why do you still want to do your father's bidding? Do you *like* the Passus Curse?" Now Malfoy looked at him, with a pure hatred in his eyes; Harry knew, and that killed him. "You plan to do the bidding of the father who bargained for your life when you were a baby by promising you to Voldemort!" Malfoy looked startled that he knew this, but he didn't comment on it.

"It's not as though I have a choice, Potter. It's not as though I can refuse..." his voice faded, and he looked through the conservatory's glass ceiling, at the white winter sky, flat and featureless and hopeless.

"But you will do it. In a way. You will become, to all intents and purposes, a loyal Death Eater. You will have the Dark Mark burned into your arm. You will do whatever they want you to do during your initiation. But none of it will mean anything because you will be mine. You will spy for me. You will give me your father." Harry took a deep breath. "I'm tired of running. I'm taking the fight to Voldemort. I'm going to take down his Death Eaters one by one, starting with your father, until he has no more servants and has to face me on his own, like a man!"

Malfoy turned and looked at Ginny. "You think my giving up my father will make a difference to her family?"

"It's the *only* thing that could make a difference to her family."

Malfoy shook his head. "Still--he's my father. Azkaban..."

"Better Azkaban than what an overzealous Auror could do to him. You know they're authorized to kill, when they deem it necessary." Malfoy considered this, swallowing, nodding.

"So you'll do it," Harry said to him. It wasn't a question.

Malfoy gave him a look with eyes that were dead. "Yes," he said tonelessly. Harry turned to Ginny.

"Ginny, you can come back." Looking still very miffed, Ginny strode back to them, her color up, her robes flying around her wildly, illustrating her mood. Harry was sure that she had never looked lovelier. "I'll give you two five minutes--that's all. After that, I start sending other Weasleys up here, understand?" They both nodded. Harry turned and walked back to the door. The wheels had been set in motion....

He turned with his hand on the knob, preparing to leave. Ginny was crying, touching Malfoy's face with her fingers as though it were a precious thing to her. He pulled her mouth to his, and she responded immediately, opening her mouth under his and twining her hands around his neck. Malfoy pressed his hands to her back, holding her as close to him as possible. Harry turned and walked out the door, his heart in his throat. Walking away from them was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

* * * * *

When Harry came back downstairs at last, he found Ron and Hermione near the refreshments, surreptitiously glancing at Viktor and Cho, who were on the other side of the room talking animatedly.

"How long have they been like that?" he whispered to them.

"About fifteen minutes. Where've you been?" Ron wanted to know.

"Queue for the loo."

"Because I've heard there are people upstairs--um--"

Harry thought of Ginny and Malfoy. "Yeah, there are people--umming--up there. Some more than others. They get rather upset if you don't know where the loo is."

Ron's eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared into his hair. "Like who?"

Harry decided to have some fun. "Guess. In five questions or less."

"Um--is it someone in Gryffindor?"

"Most people here are Gryffindor. Yes."

"Is it someone in our year?"

"Oh, come on Ron. The three of us are here, there's Parvati and Lavender dancing, and Seamus and Dean are on the couch. And Neville didn't come. The answer is: No. You've wasted two of your five questions."

"Is it someone in sixth year?"

"No. I'm done giving you clues."

"Is it someone on the Quidditch team?"

"There you go! Good one. Yes."

He looked around the room suspiciously. He saw Fred talking to Katie and Alicia. Harry and Hermione were standing with him, and just then Ginny came out of the kitchen, making Harry feel extremely relieved. She must have used the back stairs. Ron grinned.

"George and Angelina! Ha!"

"Sssssh!" Harry reached up and put his hand over Ron's mouth. Then a look of horror came over Ron's face.

"George and Angelina!" he said more quietly. "Blimey! Mum will have a meltdown, she will..."

"So don't *tell* her, you prat!" Harry hissed at him. Ron looked unbelieving.

"And she was worried about Percy and Penelope..."

"Is she worried about Bill and Charlie, too? Honestly, Ron, Percy is out of school, after all. And

George and Fred practically are,” Hermione said, sounding critical of Ron’s mother for the first time Harry could remember.

Ron still looked dazed from the revelation about George and Angelina. “Still--” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Mum told me she’d *kill* me if I ever got a girl in trouble--” He stopped abruptly, and his ears turned deep red.

“Anyway,” Harry said, trying to get them on topic again. “Viktor and Cho are hitting it off. That’s good. The plan’s going well, agreed?”

They both nodded. Something was actually working.

In no time, it seemed, it was time to leave for the station. Hermione said goodbye to Viktor at the cottage; he was Apparating back to the Chudley Cannons’ team headquarters for his luggage, then taking a Portkey back to Bulgaria to see his family for Christmas. Harry and Hermione accompanied the other students to the train, so they could see them off. For the first time, Harry noticed Hermione looking a little wistful about not going home for Christmas, and he realized that she hadn’t seen her parents since Snape and Sirius brought her to Privet Drive. Perhaps this whole Boxing Day thing was to take her mind off that, he thought. She was keeping herself busy so she wouldn’t think about missing her parents, worrying about them, wondering whether they were safe.

At the station, the luggage had already been loaded onto the train and Harry and Hermione were traveling up and down the train corridor saying goodbye to various Gryffindors and friends from other houses. Harry heard Cho calling to him, and pointedly ignored her, walking in the other direction. Suddenly, a hand emerged from a compartment and pulled him in, the door rolling shut behind him.

It was Snape. He immediately released him, and Harry straightened his cloak, wondering what was going on.

“Potter,” Snape began, “I need to talk to you. I was going to send you an owl, but this is better.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “Why do you need to talk to me?”

“Should any students need to borrow potions ingredients while I am gone, I am placing you in charge of my private store. I have charmed my office door so that only this password can open it. Only you and the headmaster know it.” He handed Harry a small piece of parchment. “I want you to keep meticulous records--the type and amount of any ingredients borrowed. They are to be replaced within a week of the start of the new term. Understand.?”

Harry was still confused as to why he was being burdened with this. “Yes, Professor.”

Harry turned to go, but suddenly Snape said with mock-casualness, “How is your owl, Potter?”

Harry turned and stared at him. What? “My owl, sir?”

“Some weeks ago at breakfast, your owl delivered to you a rather large package. Has she recovered?”

He had seen, Harry realized. He had seen Hedwig delivering the Pensieve. And I left it in the same box to give it to him. He knows it was from me. Harry had grown so accustomed to Snape missing meals in the Great Hall (perhaps to talk to Sirius? to brew Polyjuice Potion?) that it had not occurred to him that Snape was present that day; he hadn’t even looked.

“She’s fine, sir.”

“Post owls are powerful magical creatures, Potter. Don’t abuse them,” he growled.

“No sir.”

“You should go.” He looked at Harry now as though Harry had invaded his private

compartment, rather than having been yanked in through the door by Snape himself. Harry opened the door to leave, and turned to him suddenly, remembering something important.

“Oh, Professor--”

“What?”

“Good luck.” Harry looked at his face, but it was as impassive as ever; he was not about to admit he was planning to do anything that required luck.

“Remember: you are the only student with the password to my office. Keep meticulous records, Potter!”

Harry nodded and left, closing the door behind him. When he was back on the platform, standing next to Hermione, the two of them raised their hands silently to the friends whose faces were pressed to the glass, excited to be going home for Christmas. There they went, Ron and Ginny, Seamus and Dean, George and Fred and Angelina...Harry lowered his hand and Hermione turned to go; then Harry saw Draco Malfoy ride past, slowly raising a hand, looking right at Harry. Harry solemnly raised his hand in response, as if he were taking an oath.

When the train had disappeared, he turned to where Hermione was waiting for him, at the steps leading down to the path back to the castle. They walked back to Hogwarts silently, their shoes crunching on the snow, a light breeze blowing flakes from the bare branches of the trees that lined the path.

They were now the only Gryffindors at Hogwarts.

* * * * *

Chapter Seventeen

Scars

Christmas day dawned clear and sunny. When he awoke, Harry groaned, dreading another day like the one before, and the night before that.

After he and Hermione had returned to the castle from the train station, they went back up to the common room. He put Sandy back on; she'd been staying warm by the fire. Crookshanks lounged nearby with Bainbridge and her kittens (it suddenly occurred to Harry to wonder whether Crookshanks was the kittens' father). Hermione had promised Jules Quinn she'd look after the mother cat and her litter during Christmas break. Harry wished he'd had Sandy with him at the party so he wouldn't have walked in on all of those different people in the cottage. And so he would have been prepared for Snape. Snape giving him the password to his office; could anything be stranger? He hadn't told Hermione about that yet.

From the moment they entered the common room, Harry felt strange. It was so quiet, so empty. It was just the two of them, plus a few hours before, they had been lurking about the upstairs at Katie's great aunt's cottage, looking for a private place, and now they had all of Gryffindor Tower to themselves, and Harry could not ever remember being more terrified.

He told Hermione he was going to the library; she said she'd get some books and parchment and join him. But he didn't go to the library. He walked up to the third floor corridor where they'd gone in their first year to try to get to the Sorcerer's Stone. He tried the door; it was unlocked. He entered and lit his wand to break the darkness. The empty room was as he remembered it, but--thankfully--without the three-headed dog called Fluffy standing on top of

the trap door. Harry sat on the floor, leaning against the door, putting out his wandlight and just sitting in the dark.

“It is cold here,” Sandy hissed at him.

“I know. Sorry. I didn’t take you out in the snow, did I?”

“There is no light. Why are you here?”

“I’m hiding.”

“Why?”

Why indeed? What was he hiding from? Just Hermione. Hermione and an empty Gryffindor Tower.

And himself.

“Harry Potter?”

“What, Sandy?”

“You did not answer my question.”

“I don’t have a good answer, Sandy. I’m not feeling much like talking right now. No offense, I hope. I just want to sit quietly.”

“I do not take offense when someone wants to sit quietly. More people should try it.”

Harry smiled in the dark.

He had eventually come down for dinner, and when Hermione questioned him about his whereabouts, he said he’d become lost because he had run into the Bloody Baron, ghost of Slytherin house, and to avoid him he’d taken a number of turns into unfamiliar corridors and up and down strange staircases...

He heard a hissing voice under his robes saying, “Liar.” Oh, shut up, Harry thought.

Hermione had looked dubious about his explanation, but did not verbally question it.

Dumbledore had moved the house tables to the walls and they sat at a centrally-located table with Hannah and Ernie and Roger, plus the staff and faculty who had not gone elsewhere for the holiday. After dinner, Harry had hurried up to his room, climbing into bed in his clothes, until Sandy complained of it (when he slept she didn’t have to be shrouded under sleeves, since he was shirtless at that time). He changed into his pajama pants and pulled the curtains around him, wishing they were made of iron.

Harry sat up in bed now, pushing aside his bedcurtain cautiously, unwilling to let Christmas day really start, procrastinating and enjoying it. He squinted in the brightness from the window; it must have snowed again, making the grounds of Hogwarts blindingly bright. He let the curtain fall once more, remaining in the shelter of his bed, surrounded by the deep red hangings, glowing with the light, soft and blurry, without his glasses. Safe in my womb, Harry thought. He didn’t want to be born. Can’t I just stay here? he pleaded to no one in particular. Can’t time just stand still? Suddenly, he was completely in sympathy with Ron. Status quo. Is that too much to ask? And then there had been the day of Christmas Eve. He had slept late, then couldn’t find Hermione when he’d descended to the common room. He’d gone back to his room and retrieved the Marauder’s Map, eventually locating Hermione with McGonagall in her office. He did not go there, however. Instead, he stayed in his room and practiced Animagus transfiguration (putting Sandy downstairs by the fire again first). He had maintained the griffin form for about three minutes when he was with the griffin, and now he had actually worked his way up to about ten minutes. The pain was still pretty bad, but he was hoping that Moody’s anti-Cruciatuus training might help with that too. Although, if his body were divorced from his brain how would he accomplish the transfiguration? Perhaps the pain-blockage and the

Animagus transfiguration were mutually exclusive. Maybe the Animagus transfiguration relied on the wizard being even more aware of pain, not less. He considered this; it was plausible. But not comforting.

At lunch the day before, he had talked to Dumbledore and the two of them played chess the rest of the afternoon. Harry tried to ignore the information Sandy was giving him about the moves Dumbledore was going to make, but he finally gave up and succumbed to a bit of cheating with her help. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling a little bit less after Harry's sixth win. "Doing very well today, aren't you, Harry? And your snake certainly has a lot to say; she seems to be hissing quite a lot. Is she a chess savant?" Harry lifted his eyes to Dumbledore innocently. So, he doesn't suspect she has the Sight, merely a talent for chess. Interesting; you'd think Dumbledore would know something like that...Then he thought about the time he'd beaten Ron at chess. He couldn't remember whether Sandy was helping him, for some reason. Had he simply treated her predictions as something that came out of his own brain? Had he really beaten Ron? he suddenly had to wonder.

During much of the day, Hermione was meeting with McGonagall again, and after dinner, Harry again sprinted upstairs. Hermione was oddly congenial about his avoidance of her; when they were together, she didn't seem in the slightest way put out. Harry didn't know whether to be offended or relieved.

At last, he decided that it was Christmas, he was going to get up, he was going to look at his presents. No more procrastinating. No more being afraid to be alone with Hermione. It was just Hermione. Nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all.

Except wanting her so badly he thought he was going to die.

NO. He pulled his brain back from that thought. Presents. Yes. Christmas presents. He put his glasses on and then opened the curtains at the foot of the bed, finding a pile of packages on his trunk.

"What are those packages?" Sandy hissed.

"Christmas presents."

"Oh. I have been wondering what Christmas is. I have been meaning to ask. So. That is the presence of Christmas."

"No. One of those is a Christmas present. More than one, you say Christmas presents, plural. They're gifts."

"Who has given you these gifts?"

"Well, my friends. And Ron's mum. And I think I saw one from my cousin Dudley."

"The large boy."

"Right."

"What do you do with them?"

"You open them."

"And then?"

"Well--it depends on the present. Can I just get on with it, Sandy?"

"Of course."

Harry opened his gift from Ron first. Ron had bought him a copy of Great Quidditch Captains of Hogwarts by Roderick Plumpton, III. It contained a number of photographs of people flying about on broomsticks wearing the colors for Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. The players zoomed around the photos, showing off some very difficult maneuvers. A Snitch-catching technique called the Plumpton Pass had been named after the author's grandfather,

who as a Seeker in 1921 had caught a Snitch up his sleeve, maintaining until his death that it was not an accident and that he had meant to do it.

Harry leafed through the book; in a table listing the names of those who were, in the author's opinion, the greatest Quidditch captains of Hogwarts teams in the last century, Harry saw the entry "Charles Weasley, Gryffindor." Then he saw that Ron had handwritten at the bottom, "Harry Potter, Gryffindor." Harry smiled; it was actually quite touching. Ron could be strangely sentimental sometimes.

Next came a package that had arrived with Hedwig the day before; Harry had already sent her to Smeltings with Dudley's present, a Sneakoscope (so he could determine whether his roommate was in fact stealing from him). Harry had wanted him to have his gift before returning to Privet Drive for the holiday, so his aunt and uncle wouldn't get upset about Hedwig. And this way Dudley was able to send her back from Smeltings with Harry's present. Harry tore the wrappings off the box quickly; Dudley had sent more tapes for Harry's portable tape player. Oh well, he thought. He had been corresponding regularly with Dudley, but had neglected to mention that he couldn't use the tape player at Hogwarts. Maybe down in the village it would work, he thought. It might be worth a try.

He set the tapes aside and pulled Sirius' present onto his lap. Another book: "He Flew Like a Madman," which was a biography of "Dangerous" Dai Llewellyn. Harry frowned; he was sure he would like the book, but why did everyone think that all he thought about was Quidditch? Next came a large box from Mrs. Weasley. As usual, there were sweets and cakes, and a green hand-knit sweater. He munched on some treacle toffee while he reached for Hagrid's present, which was in such a small package, it fit in the palm of Harry's hand. He opened the very small box to find a model golden griffin, which yawned and stretched as he exposed it, then took to the air and began to fly about. Harry wondered briefly, as he enjoyed watching the griffin, whether Hagrid suspected anything concerning his Animagus training, but he put it down to Hagrid simply knowing how much he'd liked the griffin. Oddly enough, the only other student in the class who'd really done well with the golden griffin was Neville, who often did not want to get within thirty feet of the creatures they studied. (But Hagrid gave him good grades anyway. It occurred to Harry that Hagrid must have known who Neville's parents were and what had happened to them from the moment he met him.)

Sandy flinched when the miniature golden griffin flew near her.

"Don't worry Sandy, it's just a toy."

"I do not like it."

He put the toy griffin away. There was another book-shaped package, which he saw was from Ginny. Taking the paper off, he found a copy of *The House at Pooh Corner*. Inside, she had written, "For Harry -- I know you won't be converted from Charlie, etc., being your favorite, but sometimes if you're needing to feel better, you might find this helpful. -- Love, Ginny."

He ran his finger over the figure of Piglet on the cover of the book, thinking of her large brown eyes, her unruly red hair. Then he saw her in Draco Malfoy's arms, kissing him passionately; she had such a look of abandonment.... It both excited him to think of her having that passion in her, and made him feel utter revulsion that the person benefiting from that passion was Draco Malfoy, whom he had been forced to entrust with her safety.

The book was quite a safe gift. The sort of thing a sister would give a brother, or a friend she thought of as a brother--or who thought of her as a sister, as he'd told Malfoy.

He noticed that there was no gift in the pile from Hermione. That's odd, he thought. But then

again--he still had the present he was planning to give her, so perhaps she was bringing his in, too.

Sandy hissed at him that Hermione was coming. He rose and went to the wardrobe to look for something to wear, but he didn't like most of his options, so he was still standing with the wardrobe door open wearing just his pajama bottoms when Hermione came bursting into the room. She was still in her nightshirt and dressing gown, chirping, "It's Christmas! It's Christmas! Happy Christmas, Harry!"

He turned and laughed; he imagined her as a little girl, coming downstairs Christmas morning to a pile of packages from her loving parents, and then he stopped suddenly, trying not to think about the way Christmases had been for him before coming to Hogwarts. He looked at her again, at how pretty and excited she was, wondering fleetingly why he was so afraid to get up, be alone with her. It's just Hermione, he told himself again. What's to worry?

Returning her smile, he walked over to her and answered, "Happy Christmas, Hermione," giving her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. He felt her fingers flutter across his bare back. They separated and she glowed up at him, one hand still behind her back. Suddenly, she whipped out her hand, which held a small gift-wrapped box. Harry grinned at her, sitting down on his trunk to open it.

Inside the package was a small mahogany box with a wind-up key on the side. He turned the key clockwise several turns, but then it wouldn't go any more and he had to stop. He lifted the box lid and immediately heard the whirring of mechanical parts going round and round, then a high-pitched plucking noise met his ears as the small metal drum with infinitesimal spikes began to come into contact with the tiny metal strips that were each tuned to a specific pitch. Harry listened for a few seconds, then lifted his face to Hermione in wonder.

"It's See-o-gan," he said softly.

She smiled gently. "I know. I heard you humming it while you were studying, and I tried very hard to remember it. I went to Dumbledore when you were off with McGonagall after dinner one night and asked him if he knew what it was. He wasn't sure, he had to think about it. But Snape was next to him; they'd been talking. Dumbledore asked him to be excused for a moment so he could talk to me--he always has time for the students, you know? Snape looked really grumpy about it. And then, the strange thing is, when he heard the tune, he said, 'Lily used to sing that.' He said it rather softly; he seemed very -- I don't know -- un-Snape-like. I like that; it's a new word I've just coined. He said it was call See-o-gan. But then he spelled the Welsh, and it was Suogan or something like that. Dumbledore said he remembered it now, it was an old lullaby..."

Harry nodded; his throat felt tight. "My aunt used to sing it for Dudley..." he said softly, listening to the music box.

He could remember being four or five, sitting in his cupboard under the stairs, and his Aunt Petunia would be upstairs putting Dudley to bed, saying, "All right, there's my little Duddy-diddems! All tucked up cozy for the night..." her annoying voice sounding the way Aunt Marge's did when she was talking to her dogs. And then, it would happen, the one similarity that Harry knew of between his mother and her sister: her singing voice. It drifted down the stairs and resonated in his small, dusty prison.

He had a very vague memory of his mother singing to him, more of an assumption, really, since his aunt had let slip once that when they were children, the two sisters had sung duets in the church choir, and that the lullaby had been sung by and taught to the sisters by their mother. His

aunt would begin the Welsh lullaby, and suddenly, Harry could imagine it was his own mother, singing for him. He would close his eyes in the dark cupboard, lean back on his mean, scratchy blanket on his spider-infested mattress on the floor, and listen to the voice, the voice of a mother singing her precious son to sleep...Nevermind that it wasn't his mother, that he wasn't the precious son. He could close his eyes and listen and imagine...

Somehow, that tune had stayed with him. He didn't remember all of the words, because large parts of it were in Welsh, but the tune was as much a part of him as his scar; perhaps the tune was another kind of scar, marking him for life, an indelible part of him, an artifact from his early life, before his world blew up.

The music box wound down and the tune stopped half-way through the first phrase, leaving him hanging, waiting. But that's all right, he thought. That's for next time, something to look forward to. He closed the lid, looked up at Hermione, smiling, but she was strangely blurry, soft at the edges...

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed softly, her hand on his cheek. "Are you crying?"

He was, and it surprised him. He wiped his face with his hand hastily, not bothering to take his glasses off, just pushing them up onto his forehead momentarily, then repositioning them. He tried to smile at her again.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice catching, belying his assertion. She smiled as though she were also trying not to cry, and tousled his hair quickly with her hand.

"Good," she said quietly. She took a deep breath, trying to change the mood. "Now! Where's my present?"

Harry smiled, moved his gifts from his trunk and opened it, removed a box that was about half the size the box for the Pensieve had been. But then, he pulled it back, feeling horrified. "No! Wait, I--I'll get you something else, this is--no, Hermione, you don't want this, trust me..." She furrowed her brow. "What? What are you on about, Harry? I'm sure whatever it is--I mean, I loved my birthday present."

"That was--I don't know. That was easier. We weren't--you know. September was before--" He was babbling and stumbling over his words, unable to say what he meant. "I mean, you got me something so--so wonderful, and this is--don't open it, *please*..."

But Hermione pulled out her wand and summoned the package from him, with a satisfied look on her face. "I am going to open my gift, Harry Potter, and you can't stop me." She smiled, putting the box down on Ron's bed and opening it. She removed a large lump covered in tissue-paper, which seemed rather heavy. She frowned, pulling the paper off, until what looked like a gargoyle was revealed, about the size of a human head, but with the face of a lion. She put it down on the bed, taking a second tissue-wrapped lump out of the box, finding an identical lion gargoyle. She sat down on the bed, holding both lions on her lap, looking at them, perplexed. Finally, Harry couldn't take it anymore. "I'm sorry, Hermione! I'm terrible at this. You hate it, I know you do, oh bloody hell..."

She looked at him, not angry or looking upset at all, merely puzzled. "But, Harry--what are they?"

He stopped verbally beating himself up. "They're bookends," he said quietly. She suddenly looked like she'd had an epiphany.

"Ooooooh! Bookends! Of course--"

--because you're Hermione Granger and you read a lot and have a lot of books and I'm just about the sorriest excuse for a boyfriend that the world has ever seen and of course you're

going to hurl those at my head now and of course I deserve it so I should have expected it--” But as Harry’s diatribe continued, Hermione’s laughter finally made its way into his consciousness, and he stopped, amazed. She put down the bookends and walked over to him, putting her arms around his waist and giving him a firm hug. He awkwardly put his arms around her. She looked up at him.

“Is that what you are, Harry? My boyfriend?” she smiled.

“Well, unofficially, I suppose. We can’t be official yet, can we?”

“True, true. But if the way Viktor and Cho were at the Christmas party is any indication, maybe we won’t have to wait much longer.”

He looked down at her shining face. “That would be nice...” he said, leaning down to kiss her. Her hands pressed on his back, then started to caress his skin in circular patterns, sending signals to other parts of his body....He pulled back abruptly before she could detect the effect it was having on him. The two of them weren’t wearing much clothing, they were in a room with five beds, and there wasn’t another soul in Gryffindor Tower.

“Well, we’d better get dressed and go down to breakfast,” he tried to say in a normal voice, although to his own ears he sounded slightly strangled. “Fancy skating after that? Or sledding?” Hermione walked to the window, evidently oblivious to how she’d been torturing him. “Sounds good. There’s a fresh snowfall. And--oh my.” Her voice had dwindled into almost-nothingness. “They’re -- they’re here, Harry,” she whispered.

Harry turned to find her staring out the window at the grounds with a look of abject terror on her face. Harry joined her at the window. What he saw made his blood run cold.

Walking across the grounds down near the lake and heading for the forest were seven enormous shapes. Each one had to be at least twenty feet tall, one or two might have been twenty five feet. They were all dressed in cloaks that looked patched together from multiple animal skins, at least several hundred required for each cloak. But they weren’t skins from small animals like rabbits or foxes. The heads had been left on, and Harry could see deer, enormous bears, mountain lions, wolves...They walked into the forest and the trees swallowed them up, since the massive firs were about twice as tall as the giants. It took some time. Even after all of the giants were concealed in the forest, the tops of the trees continued to shiver, as though it were a field of wheat and normal-sized people were pushing the wheat stalks aside to walk through it. Huge footprints marked the path where they’d been walking through the snow on their way to the forest.

Harry swallowed, watching the last of the giants enter the forest and disappear from sight.

“Remind me,” he said shakily to Hermione, “not to go into the forest ever again...”

She nodded, still staring at the spot where the last giant had disappeared, and he remembered how terrified she’d been when Hagrid’s mum had picked her up. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“Go dress for breakfast.”

She nodded, still dumb, and turned to leave in a daze. When she was gone, Harry looked out the window again. The trees in the forest were still moving.

Giants had come to Hogwarts.

* * * * *

Breakfast in the Great Hall was festive, even with the small number of people that had remained at the castle. The usual complement of twelve Christmas trees adorned the huge space, each decorated with different magical ornaments, everything from live fairies and enchanted bubbles

to tiny silver and gold bells that played carols in complicated harmonies, like a miniature carillon. They ate and talked to the sound of the tinkling melodies, Dumbledore at the head of the table, wishing everyone a Happy Christmas as they arrived, passing around all manner of delicacies that did not normally grace the breakfast table at Hogwarts. Harry tried a delicious raspberry-filled croissant and Hermione helped herself to some gravlax and fresh sour cream with feathery fronds of dill, caviar and small rounds of toast with chopped hard-boiled eggs.

Roger Davies was actually being somewhat relaxed--he wasn't even wearing his Head Boy badge. Hannah and Ernie kept looking at each other furtively and smiling and coloring. Harry didn't have to wonder what was going on in Hufflepuff house last night...Then he realized that there were no students from Slytherin. Typical, he thought. No one in Slytherin would dream of waiting on house elves on Boxing Day. But then--hardly anyone else in the school had stayed to participate in the Boxing Day switch, either.

After breakfast, Harry and Hermione rose when Dumbledore did and tried to discreetly follow him from the hall. He stopped suddenly and they stumbled into him. Dumbledore turned, smiling at them as they picked themselves up, and said, "Shall we go to my office to talk?" They nodded, and then the three of them continued their upward path to his office. At the gargoyle that guarded the entrance, Dumbledore said, "Fizzing Whizzbees!" The wall opened, and Harry saw the now-familiar spiral stair that led to the round room where all of the headmasters of Hogwarts had held sway. Dumbledore sat behind his desk and gestured for Harry and Hermione to sit in the two chairs before it.

"Now, I think I know what this is about, but why don't I let you tell me anyway?"

Harry took a deep breath. "It's the giants sir--"

Dumbledore looked unperturbed. "Yes?" he said, still smiling.

"Yes, well--we saw them go into the forest this morning. Seven of them. And we've met Hagrid's mum, too." He looked sideways at Hermione; he wondered if her gravlax was going to come up again.

"And you're concerned," Dumbledore said. It was not a question.

"Well, yes. I mean--what are they going to eat? Will they stay in the forest? What about the magical creatures that live in there--the centaurs, the unicorns--will they be in danger?"

Dumbledore smiled and said kindly, "Now, now, Harry. Not to worry. I just met with Fridwulfa again yesterday--handsome, isn't she? And she assures me that her friends are quite well-behaved. While they've been in eastern Europe, none of them have eaten a single human, and they've brought a good supply of food for themselves. The students here will be perfectly safe."

"Well, then, what about security? I mean, we saw them go right into the forest. There are huge footprints in the snow out there! What if Hannah or Ernie or Roger saw? What if one of the professors decides to tell the board of governors?"

"The staff all know. Not everyone is happy, but they all know. And Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff houses do not have windows that look out toward the forest, as Gryffindor Tower does. And I had Hagrid smooth out the footprints this morning." Dumbledore stopped smiling now; he looked very grave indeed. "We need the giants as our allies, Harry. Not our enemies. There is an expression, 'My enemy's enemy is my friend.' Do you know that one?"

"I think so."

"Well, we need to get as many of the enemies of Voldemort as possible all working on the same side. Hogwarts is a very safe place, Harry, but still--you were spirited away with a Portkey and almost killed. And Cedric *was* killed."

At the mention of Cedric's name, Harry lowered his head. He could not look at Dumbledore suddenly, even though he knew he was not being blamed.

"The giants are yet another defense we will have at the school now. I do not know whether we will need them. I do not know when Voldemort or the Death Eaters will strike next--things have been strangely quiet since the summer, since--" and he looked at Hermione, whose eyes were very wide now "--Hermione was taken in Bulgaria. There have only been two or three reports of Death Eater activity in that time." Near the Weasleys, Harry thought. But he didn't want to say it with Hermione in the room; she would be afraid for Ron, having gone home for Christmas, even though his oldest brothers were also there.

Dumbledore went on. "It is possible that something is going to happen soon..."

Tonight, thought Harry. But again, he could not say aloud that he knew about that; Dumbledore might regret having given Harry his dad's Invisibility Cloak, if he didn't already. He simply nodded at Dumbledore. And then he realized--he hadn't even told Hermione about that, and about Malfoy and Ginny. (Although she'd said that she knew who Ginny was planning to meet that night--assuming she was right.)

"All in all, Harry, try not to be too alarmed about the giants. I plan to make sure they are quite happy and comfortable here, and also to assure that the other residents of the forest are able to carry on as usual. Was there anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now, who wants to go sledding?" His eyes were twinkling at them again and Harry and Hermione had to smile. McGonagall was a fine head-of-house, Harry thought, and as deputy headmistress, she would probably be running things one day; but for now, he was glad that Dumbledore was headmaster. He couldn't picture McGonagall using the names of sweets for her office passwords, or sledding with the students in the winter.

They had an enjoyable day, romping outdoors. Hagrid joined them too. Harry and Hermione did not mention the giants. Every so often, Harry noticed the trees of the forest swaying in a way that clearly had nothing to do with the wind, and he caught his breath, half-wishing he'd brought his Firebolt, so he could pull Hermione onto it and zip up to the castle quickly, in the event that a hungry giant should emerge from the trees. After eating lunch, they went back outdoors again. As long as Harry did not see the trees moving, he was fine. There were other things that could make him nervous, however. He was extremely glad to see that Hagrid was not interested in trying to skate on the lake...

Then it was time for Christmas dinner. Harry always knew to expect a sumptuous feast, and this year was no different, even though their numbers were small. Roger had asked Dumbledore's permission to invite Fleur and her sister Gabrielle up from the village. Once more, when she saw him, Fleur performed the two-kisses-on-each-cheek maneuver. Harry looked at Hermione. She was smiling, nonplused; good, thought Harry, she's stopped getting jealous over Fleur. Or, he considered, maybe she was reassured by the "boyfriend" statement he'd made that morning. In addition to the usual turkeys and hams and multiple side dishes and flaming Christmas pudding, there were, of course, Christmas crackers at every place, and more scattered about the table. Hermione and McGonagall opened a cracker together, and out leaped a number of small creatures that looked nominally like small bunnies, but they appeared to be somewhat insubstantial, as though they were made from the fluff that one finds under beds and dressers. There was also a hat with a feather duster on top. McGonagall placed it on her head, giving Hermione a rare smile, then turning to Dumbledore.

“I’m all set for tomorrow, Albus, aren’t I?”

Dumbledore, for once, looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh. Hermione was cooing to the dust bunnies, who were leaping about the table now, unfortunately causing a small cloud of dust to rise into the air every time one of them landed. Some of the food was becoming quite grey.

Hagrid pulled a cracker with little Gabrielle Delacour; it emitted a hat with the head of a Hungarian Horntail on it. “Just like the one ye got past in the Tournament, Harry!” he exclaimed happily. Harry and Hermione smiled at him. The cracker also contained small model dragons which moved about, also just like the ones they’d selected for the Tournament. Fleur recoiled from these, perhaps remembering the first task, but her sister gasped with pleasure as they flew about between the goblets and pitchers of eggnog and alit on the plum pudding. There were several different species, including a Norwegian Ridgeback. “Just like Norbert...” Harry heard him say softly, sadly. Harry could tell Hagrid still missed Norbert a great deal. Unfortunately, this wasn’t exactly a good time for making an overseas trip to visit a dragon.

Then Dumbledore and Harry pulled a cracker together, and what leaped out was a hat with a golden griffin on it, the wingspread a good two feet. “Ah, that’s just the thing for me!” Dumbledore said, putting it on his head in place of his usual wizard’s hat. Some small toy snakes also burst out of the same cracker. Harry poked at them. They were like Muggle rubber snakes from joke shops, except that they moved and hissed and coiled themselves around his finger when he picked them up. But, of course, thought Harry, these don’t speak Parseltongue. He listened for a few minutes to the hissing of the toy snakes and it just sounded like hissing to him. Sandy was confused; she said as much under his robes. He hissed back softly to her that he would explain later.

Then, finally, Roger and Fleur shared a cracker that emitted small white doves and a bridal veil and black top hat, much to Roger’s consternation. He turned quite red, while Fleur busied herself about trying on the veil and getting others around her to tell her how striking she looked. She shoved the top hat on Roger’s head so hard, he had to struggle to pull it off, and when he did, there was a telltale red mark across his forehead.

After dinner, they played some games and Dumbledore led them in singing carols. By the time Harry and Hermione went upstairs to Gryffindor Tower, it was rather late. Harry anticipated that there might be a problem extricating himself from her, but she yawned hugely, saying, “Oh! It’s going to be a big day tomorrow! We’ve got a hundred house elves to cook breakfast for, and there’s only--let’s see--seven teachers who stayed and five students. Twelve of us. But McGonagall and I have been planning things out, so I think we’ll have things pretty well under control. Of course we can’t pop in and out of rooms like the house elves, but--”

“Oh, so that’s what you and McGonagall have been doing. Planning for Boxing Day! But--wait, Hermione. If no one can Apparate on the grounds of Hogwarts, how come house elves can?”

“It’s PEOPLE who can’t Apparate on the school grounds, Harry. And anyway, what the house elves do doesn’t get classified as Apparating by the Ministry of Magic. It’s just how they move around, like the way we walk or run. And they don’t have to learn to do it or be licensed or use wands or anything. They just start getting around that way from the time they’re born. Must drive new parents crazy, I’d think.” New elf parents. Elves having elven babies. That was something he’d never thought about before.

“Right, well, good night Hermione. Happy Christmas.” He kissed her on the forehead. But she caught him around the neck as he was trying to get away.

“Happy Christmas, Harry,” she said raising herself up and kissing his mouth gently, opening her mouth for a brief agonizing second, then pulling back and kissing his nose affectionately. She looked at him, seemed to sigh for a moment and went up the staircase to the girls’ dorms. Harry gazed up at her retreating back for a moment, mightily tempted to follow her up, but he stopped himself. Self-control. I have self-control.

But he had to keep repeating this to himself over and over until he had crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin.

Before he closed his eyes, he said to Sandy, “Tell me I have self-control, Sandy.”

“All right. You have self-control, Harry Potter.”

But he didn’t completely believe her. Then he heard her hissing again.

“What is self-control, Harry Potter?”

Harry sighed.

“Good night, Sandy.”

* * * * *

The sea crashed against the rocks violently, sending up spray a hundred feet above the water, often much more. The wind was high, as though a storm were brewing, but there were no clouds in the sky. The rocks were jagged and dangerous-looking, as though giant knives had been sunk down into the water with their blades pointing up. The cliff rose straight and steep, chalk white and lifeless on the sheer face; no life could be supported by that lime, that corrosive lime, especially in combination with the salt spray...

Dover, he thought. They’re at Dover.

Then, at the top--grass touched with frost, a thin carpet of it. Moss too, and lichen clinging to the sea-wet rocks here and there. There was a pervasive smell of salt. The moon hung over the landscape, not quite full, but still glowing like a beacon, casting everything into high relief. The stars seemed too bright and numerous to be real, stars that city dwellers never see, for the urban lights. It was a magical place, a beautiful place.

It is an evil place.

Hooded, cloaked figures stood in a loose circle, perhaps twenty-five feet in diameter, not ten feet from the sheer drop. They did not speak; some of them seemed to be shivering in the cold, in the freezing sea spray that could not be escaped this close to the edge of the cliff, the edge of the world. Near the center of the circle stood their leader, tall and thin and silent. Only he did not betray any reaction to the environment, standing as still and unwavering as if it were a midsummer’s night. Perhaps he no longer felt the cold, or had such cold blood running through his veins that the cruel, scouring wind was warm by comparison. A large snake curled around his feet, as if guarding him from harm--although who would dare to attempt such a thing, no one knew. Certainly no one present, not if they wanted to see another dawn...

He turned away from the sea; he was watching, waiting, expecting someone. They appeared as if out of thin air, some ten yards from the waiting circle. A shivering man with a curling-up beard and hair that had once been black but was now streaked with white was being escorted by two more figures in hooded cloaks. He could not walk properly, he was being dragged, his feet scarring the landscape, leaving a twin trail behind him through the moss and scrub and lichen. Another figure followed. He did not wear his hood on his head, and he seemed to be the only one besides their leader who was unaffected by the weather.

That will happen when you’ve lived for twelve years as a rat.

He pointed a silver hand, directing the prisoner’s escorts. With a flourish, he withdrew a wand

from his robes, flicked it toward the center of the circle, and at his silent command, a piece of earth rose like an ancient altar stone, as if it had been there for time out of mind. The escorts lifted the man onto the stone, pushing him down into a prone position, then joining their comrades on the perimeter.

The hoodless man stood by the side of his Master. The Master nodded at him, a sign of approval that the servant clearly had been coveting. He fawned on his master, bowing, practically kissing the hem of his garment.

“Karkaroff, my Lord.”

The Master walked away from the sycophant as if he did not exist, going to the raised altar-like stone, surveying his quarry, gliding his eyes over him as if deciding what types of torture would be most exquisitely painful. The most excruciating pain. Yes, for such a coward...he'd find out what there really was to be frightened of...

He waved his hand in an almost careless gesture, and snake-like cords appeared that bound the prisoner's legs and chest to the massive stone. He went to stand at the prisoner's head, looking down at him so that they were each upside-down to the other.

“Karkaroff--” the Master said softly, almost hissing the “f” sound, like a snake.

The prisoner had his eyes squeezed shut, but that did not satisfy the Master. With a flick of one finger, the prisoner's eyes were forced to stay open; in fact, he could no longer blink, and this inability, within seconds, began to make him shake violently.

“Karkaroff,” the Master said again, his voice high and low at once, hissing and growling. “Why did you not return to me when I summoned my servants upon my regaining my body? Why did you run away like a scared little rabbit?”

And suddenly, there was no man on the stone, but a small brown hare, looking confused and disoriented, nose twitching, eyes still unable to blink. An instant later, the man was lying on the stone again, bound to it still, as though that had been his state all along. The figures in the circle laughed appreciatively, and their Master beamed around at them, satisfied with their reaction.

He needs an audience.

“You should have known that you could not hide from me, not when you still bear the mark that tells you who owns you...”

The prisoner was shaking all over, tears running down his temples into his hair, his eyes wild from several minutes of exposure to the cold night air and sea spray. He whispered something, faltered.

“What? Do you have something to say in your defense?”

The prisoner nodded and tried to speak again. “Your heir,” he choked. “I have been seeing to the education of your heir...”

The heir.

The Master smirked, as if this were of no consequence.

“He may or may not be my heir. I have yet to determine that. I have already started to find him useful, however, and I hope that soon he may join us here. But if you think that that will buy you back into my good graces...you must think I am the Minister of Magic.”

He smiled ever so slightly, and this time, the figures around the circle laughed in a more subdued manner. The Master paced around the stone in a leisurely fashion, as though he had all the time in the world--which he did.

“However, I should not be too angry, my wayward one, because this evening you will be very useful to me. In fact, extremely useful. You see, a new Death Eater is here who will take your

place, and your fate will amply demonstrate to him what happens to those who do not obey their Master.” Another flick of his finger, and the prisoner’s eye muscles could perform normally again, blinking when necessary, lubricating his eyes. But it was a small comfort; he knew what was coming. Or thought he knew. The Master moved to the prisoner’s feet, facing away from him.

“Bring him to me,” he hissed softly.

A hooded figure standing opposite the Master reached out to the thinner figure standing next to him and touched his arm, making him flinch. Hesitant at first, this figure moved forward, in what would be confident strides, if he were not shaking so much. The Master made a gesture with his hand, a slight pushing downwards, and the slim figure went to his knees. Another casual gesture, and of its own accord, his hood flipped back, revealing yellow-white hair and milky skin, storm-grey eyes reflecting the moon.

“We have here at last--the Moonchild. See how even the color of his hair is like moonlight.” He seemed like he might touch that fair hair, but his long-fingered hand did not actually come in contact with it, merely moved above the bare head, which was shaking, shivering in the cold, his teeth clenched so he would not make noise.

“You!” the Master said to him. “You have been promised to me since your first birthday, because I would have killed you then, my future enemy. Tell me now why I should not kill you.” The grey eyes rose to the Master, then looked down again. “I am not your enemy, my Lord.” The voice did not waver, was not loud, but even and clear on the cold air.

“Not my enemy? The signs said so. The Prophecy said so. But I spared you, allowed your parents to raise you to serve me. I waited to see what you would become.”

A figure at the perimeter of the circle pulled back his hood, revealing another head of silvery hair. “I have raised him to be your faithful servant, my Lord.”

The Master moved toward the speaker. “Have you raised him to be more faithful than *you*?” The man who had spoken hung his head, silent.

Suddenly, from his kneeling position, the youth spoke, louder this time, with a clarity that sliced through the cold air and the noise of the sea. “I am not your enemy, my Lord, because we have the same enemy.”

The Master gestured with his hand again, carelessly, and the massive snake moved so that it curled around the kneeling figure. It took its own tail in its mouth, completing the circle.

“Name this enemy,” the Master hissed to him.

“POTTER.”

The word hung on the still air, and even the waves seemed to have stopped crashing on the rocks. Then the hooded figures began to murmur to each other, as though a profanity had been uttered.

My enemy’s enemy is my friend.

With a gesture, the Master achieved their silence again, and once more, the only sound was of the sea. He walked around the kneeling figure inside the snake’s circle.

“If Potter is your enemy, then indeed, we are allies.” He walked to the stone again, placing his long, thin hand on the foot of the prisoner, who closed his eyes. Suddenly, he took out his wand and pointed it at the youth, as erect and dignified as he could be while on his knees, and cried, “CRUCIO!”

The fair young man threw his arms out, convulsing, his head thrown back as pain deeper than any pain imaginable coursed through him, like fire through all his veins, like hot knives piercing

every inch of skin, like having that skin flayed, removed layer by layer by excruciating layer... But he remained in the kneeling position throughout the pain, and did not cry out, although some guttural grunts escaped his clenched jaw and his eyes squeezed shut from the pain, tears slowly seeping out from under his lids, making pale streaks on his moonlit face.

The Master lowered his wand, and the pain stopped. The youth huddled inside the snake circle, his head on his knees, catching his breath, not looking up.

“Now,” the Master said silkily. “That hurt, didn’t it?”

He raised his face, still in his huddled position. He was no longer erect and proud; he was broken. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Ask me not to do it again,” the Master said, almost petulantly.

“Please, don’t do it again, my Lord,” he said immediately, gasping as he said it.

The Master smiled. “Obedience is so important. I cannot have anything but unquestioned obedience. You see here before you an exemplary Death Eater,” he told the other hooded figures. “All he is missing is--the Mark. Rise.” The young man struggled to his feet, shaking violently. His legs looked like they would give way any moment. “Give me your arm.” The requested arm was extended, and the Master pulled the sleeve back, showing the pure white skin there.

“Whose are you?”

“Yours, my Lord.”

The Master placed the tip of his wand in the crook of the young man’s elbow, crying with a terrible voice, “MORSMORDRE!”

The young man screamed in agony as he had not when he was being tortured, sinking to his knees again and holding his left arm in his right hand, as the figure of the skull and snake burned themselves into his flesh.

There is nothing like the smell of burning human flesh.

Slowly, he raised his head again to look at the Master, his breath coming in irregular pants and heaves, the skin of his forearm smoking faintly. He would carry the scar for the rest of his life.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

The Master threw back his head in what passed for a laugh. He turned to the hoodless man with the silver hand. “You could learn a thing or two from this one, Wormtail.” He turned to the young man again and commanded him, “Rise.” He stood, no longer shaking, but as composed as the Dark Lord. The snake let get of its own tail, slithering to its Master, sorting itself into a coil next to the altar stone.

“Now, as my newest servant, you will help me with the matter of our friend here,” he said, gesturing at the prisoner.

The grey eyes flashed, meeting the terrified eyes of the prisoner. The youth looked momentarily apprehensive, then a shield went up, a barrier, and he was unreadable again.

“Am I to do the killing curse, my Lord?”

“No, no. When the time comes, that will be my very great pleasure. And a quick death is not the type of reward he deserves. No, you will have the privilege of being first to curse him with a pain that will make him wish he were dead. You have just experienced it yourself. Was that your first time?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Having just been through it, you should have enough pain and anger in you to pull it off, even though you are so young. Just remember all of the agony you felt, how every bone in your

body--”

“My Lord?” There was a slight gasp from the other figures; he had interrupted the Master. The Master looked at him through slits of eyes.

“Yes?” he hissed.

“I know of something else.”

The Master scrutinized him with interest. “Something else? The Cruciatu Curse is called unforgivable because it is the worst pain that can possibly be inflicted on someone. Can less pain possibly be appropriate for this traitor?”

“It is--from another country. I believe it would be unforgivable as well if the authorities in this country knew about it, but as yet, there are no laws regarding it.”

The Dark Lord smiled. “You have piqued my interest. Very well. I am feeling generous. You may proceed.”

“He needs to be untied.” Now Wormtail whipped his head around.

“My Lord--” he began, but with a flick of his hand, the Master had removed the bonds that held the prisoner to the stone. Cautiously, the prisoner sat up on the stone. He didn’t look inclined to move further than that, however, as he apprehensively looked at the young man who was planning to cause him pain.

The fair head turned toward his father momentarily, who nodded at him. He turned back to the prisoner, pulling his wand from his cloak and pointing it at him with a straight arm that did not shake.

“HARA KIRI!” he cried, and it was terrible to hear the hate in the young voice, newly changed, too high still to belong to a man, too low to be a boy. The curse struck the prisoner, and he was forced to position himself as if kneeling. He did not seem to be in pain as yet; he seemed to be going through a pantomime of picking up an object, tracing its invisible length through the air...

Is that a dagger I see before me?

...then taking the invisible object and moving as if plunging it into his lower left abdomen, grunting with pain, then pulling it across his midsection. The prisoner looked down, and that was when the screaming began. The screams were high and long, and the prisoner paused barely a second between them, clutching his stomach desperately and continuing to scream so loudly that it was not possible to hear the crashing waves anymore over the deafening crescendo of his pain. Finally, the prisoner blacked out from the pain, and the Master turned to the youth and slowly began to strike his hands together, smiling grimly. The other figures also clapped solemnly, as the fair head turned, looking around at them, seeing their approval and respect.

When the applause had ceased, the Master said to him, “Tell, me, what did he feel?”

The young man glanced briefly at his father again and turned back to his new Master. “He imagined that he was plunging a large ceremonial dagger into his midsection and slicing himself open. Then he imagined that he saw his own entrails spilling out onto his lap--and he felt all of the pain as if it were actually happening.”

The Master nodded in appreciation. “The illusion of self-mutilation, of suicide. Well-chosen.”

He turned to the other figures. “Witness the new generation! For fourteen years, no new Death Eaters have joined me, but now we will add to our numbers and increase our power!” He pointed his wand into the air and cried, “MORSMORDRE!” once more, and this time, an explosion sounded, waking the unconscious prisoner, who looked down, astounded that he did not appear to be bleeding to death from what his own hand had done, then looking up, to see the huge green skull and the snake, hovering in the sky over his head. He began shaking once

more.

Suddenly, pounding footsteps were heard. Another hooded figure was running toward the circle, panting, "My Lord, my Lord," repeatedly. When he was inside the perimeter, he threw back his hood to reveal that he was--

The youth's father.

The fair young man turned and looked at the man he'd been regarding as his father, then back at the newcomer. The two men were identical.

The Master looked back and forth between the two men with narrowed eyes.

"My Lord," the new arrival panted, pointing at the father already standing in the circle. "That man is an impostor! A spy!"

"No, my Lord!" the man said who had been in the circle. "He is the impostor!"

The two men glared at each other, wands out, when suddenly, the Master raised his wand and pointed it toward the man who had been there the entire time. "We shall see!" he cried, and all of the other Death Eaters converged upon him with their wands drawn, forgetting about the youth and the prisoner. The newcomer grabbed the prisoner and the youth and pulled them away from the stone, back in the direction he'd come. But Wormtail saw them go, and his voice was carried on the wind.

"Master!"

The Dark Lord turned; in less than a second, his wand was aimed at the fleeing trio.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Harry screamed continuously, holding his scar, his head threatening to explode from the pain.

A flash of green light was the only visible thing in the world. It was a screaming green flash. The screaming went on and on and on and on and on...It was the sound of the world turning in on itself and disappearing.

* * * * *

Chapter Eighteen

Boxing Day

The scream resounded through Gryffindor Tower, echoing in the stairwells, the noise bouncing off the unyielding stones, which refused to absorb the horrific sound, but sent it on its way again and again and again, amplifying it, so that it grew exponentially worse with each repetition.

At the center of Harry's scream was the terrible not-knowing. Had the killing curse hit someone? Who? Harry remembered Sirius agreeing with Snape that if two Lucius Malfoys showed up when Voldemort summoned the Death Eaters, that would be a disaster.

And that was exactly what had happened.

Harry sat up, his head filled with a blinding pain.

Was Draco Malfoy dead?

Was Lucius Malfoy? Was Snape? Sirius?

Sweat was running in rivers down Harry's face, his neck, his chest and back. He clutched at his basilisk amulet, thinking *Ginny, Ginny*. If Malfoy was dead because of him, she would hate him.

All my fault. All my--

"Harry!" Hermione cried. He heard her stumble into the room, panting, sounding like she had run as fast as she could down the stairs to the girls' dorms and back up the boys' stairs. She

parted the bedcurtains, finding him sitting up, perspiring profusely, looking fevered and ill. She hadn't put her slippers on, nor her dressing gown over her blue flannel pajamas. Her curls were wild and her eyes were blazing. She held her wand before her, with the end lit.

"Harry!" she said again. "Are you all right?" She put her hand on his cheek, then tentatively moved a finger to his scar. He cried out again, knocking her hand away, putting his head in his hands and crouching on the bed, rocking back and forth. She backed up. After a few seconds he glanced up at her. He could tell she was frightened. He swallowed.

Harry tried to sit up, ran his fingers through his hair. The room looked strange in the light of Hermione's wand. There were no clouds at Dover, in his dream, but at Hogwarts the sky was covered with a grey blanket; another snow storm was coming. No moonlight penetrated the clouds; the room would have been pitch black without the wandlight.

He looked at her. "Going to the lav," he said shakily, standing slowly, moving toward the door as if he'd just learned to walk. She sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

Harry crossed the hall, holding onto the door frames, staggering into the small, tiled room. The magic that was Hogwarts detected his presence and the candles on the walls and hanging from the high ceiling flickered to life. (Not everyone thinks of taking a wand to the lavatory.) The light hurt his eyes, and he staggered to a sink, squinting, leaning on it heavily, looking down. It looked like all of the Hogwarts sinks. It looked like the sink in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom that led to the Chamber of Secrets, where Ginny--and he--had almost died.

At the time, it had felt like the worst day of Harry's life, when he had found out that Ginny was in the Chamber, probably dead. Sitting in the common room with her brothers, waiting, with that rising feeling of dread in his chest...

Since then he had slain the basilisk and saved her, and saved Sirius and Buckbeak the hippogriff. And then--there was Cedric.

Harry turned on the cold tap, holding his hands under the water, leaning over to splash it on his face. He cried out when it touched his scar; the water drops that landed there immediately turning to steam. He winced, looked in the mirror. Even though he wasn't wearing his glasses, he was close enough to the mirror that he had no trouble seeing himself. His scar was red and seemed to be throbbing. The skin around it was slightly pink and inflamed. His pupils were very large, leaving only a thin sliver of green iris around the blackness. He had a slight shadow on his face; he would just use his wand to shave in the morning, like Ron did. No transfiguration.

After splashing water over his torso too ("Sorry, Sandy.") and drying off, he returned to his room. He went to the silver pitcher near the window to pour himself a drink of water, then turned to face Hermione.

"Voldemort," he choked. "Killing curse--my scar--"

Hermione nodded, rising and putting her arms around him. He gathered her to him. It was so comforting to have her warmth pressed against him, to feel her breath on his skin, her hands caressing his back. He kissed her on the forehead, then moved to get back into bed. When he was lying down on his back, his arms behind his head, wondering how he was ever going to sleep again, she reached for the music box she'd given him that morning; she wound it up and opened the lid. The lullaby floated out of the little box. Harry smiled at her and she smiled back, stroked his cheek.

He thought she was going to go back to her dorm then, but she pulled back the covers and climbed into his bed with him, snuggling up to him, lying on her left side. She put her head on his chest, her right arm--still holding her lit wand--across his stomach. He looked down at her,

kissed her forehead again.

He would tell her everything, he knew. She had to know.

He soon felt rather than heard her breathing peacefully, slumbering on his chest, and he took her wand from her hand, saying, "Nox," and put it on the bedside table. He wrapped his arms around her, feeling safe and protected somehow, now that this slip of a girl was with him, by his side.

The music box stopped just before the end of the lullaby--only one note was left unplayed. Tomorrow he would tell her everything.

* * * * *

Although he lay back for long periods of time with his eyes closed, he slept only sporadically. He felt comforted by the warmth and weight of Hermione beside him, in the dark. Near sunrise, a soft grey aura started to break through the blackness in the room, and in this predawn light he saw that she'd turned over on her side, with her back to him. He rolled over beside her, spooning her, putting his left arm around her waist, pressing against her, feeling her back against his chest, the backs of her thighs against the fronts of his.

He watched her sleep, watched her dream, her eyes moving back and forth beneath her eyelids. What are you dreaming about, Hermione? He caressed her hair with his left hand, then rested it on her hip, feeling tired enough to doze off again at last, unable to keep his eyes open any longer, to resist the lure of sleep.

When he woke again, he could tell it was much later, although the flat grey light was not appreciably different from the dawn. There was a slight hollow in the mattress where she had been lying, an indentation on the pillow where her head had been. But when he put his hand on the place next to him where she'd lain, it was cold. She'd been gone for a while.

Harry looked at his watch; it was nine-thirty! Not only had he not woken early enough to run, but he'd let Hermione down. He was supposed to help her make breakfast for the elves. He threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, slipped on his sneakers without untying them and retying. He practically leapt out the portrait hole, running down the stairs to the kitchens so rapidly, his legs in such a repetitive rhythm, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop at the bottom.

He arrived at the painting of the bowl of fruit breathing hard, and tickled the pear to open the door. Upon entering the kitchens, Harry was surprised to see, not a bustle of activity, but a calm breakfast being enjoyed by Dumbledore, Hagrid, Moody and Roger Davies.

"Good morning, Harry!" Dumbledore greeted him. "Sit down, sit down. You missed the elves' breakfast, but we'll get you up to speed by lunch! Dobby has them outside playing in the snow right now, if you can believe it. I think I'll check on them soon, make sure they're not trying to clean the windows or shovel paths to the greenhouses!"

Harry smiled; convincing the elves not to work was not half the battle--it was pretty much the *whole* battle. He sat next to Dumbledore, who passed him a plate of toast and some jam. Harry poured himself some orange juice.

"So," Dumbledore said softly, once Harry was eating. "Hermione mentioned something about your scar." Harry nodded. "We'll go upstairs to talk when you've eaten." Harry nodded again, as he drank.

He saw again the circle of Death Eaters in the moonlight, Malfoy's face when he thanked Voldemort for burning the Dark Mark into his arm....He's got nerve, Harry thought. I'll give him that.

“So, Harry,” Hagrid said to him. “Did yeh like yer present?”

Harry smiled at him. “Definitely. Thanks, Hagrid. Did you like yours?” Harry, Ron and Hermione had jointly given Hagrid one of Colin’s photos, another copy of the one Hermione had received for her birthday, in a frame they’d bought in Hogsmeade that was bordered by all manner of magical creatures: unicorns, hippogriffs, centaurs, dragons, griffins (the usual kind, not the Gryffindor kind) and other things--but no Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Hagrid smiled in that way he had that made it seem that he was about to cry. “Yeah. I loved it,” he said, sniffing for a second.

“Potter!” Moody said suddenly. He was sitting across the table from Harry, eating a sausage he’d speared on the small knife he carried with him at all times. His blue magical eye was swiveled to the side, perhaps watching to see who might come through the door next (or who was on the other side of it), but his normal eye was fixed on Harry, small and dark and beady.

“Sir,” Harry replied, swallowing his juice quickly and setting down his goblet.

“I expect you to take the lead in class after the holiday!” he informed him. “Been letting Weasley and Longbottom get all the points with their essays! I expected better of you!”

Harry squirmed, wishing he were not saying this in front of Dumbledore and Hagrid, not to mention Roger Davies, who suddenly seemed to be listening intently with an expression on his face that looked designed to give him the appearance of not listening at all.

“Yes, sir,” Harry responded, hoping that would be the end of it.

“I mean, that Hamlet essay,” Moody went on. “About him being jealous of his uncle because he wished he had had the nerve himself to kill his father and bed his mother! Where the hell did you get that idea?”

Unexpectedly, Dumbledore came to the rescue. “Actually, Alastor, that’s a pretty standard Oedipal interpretation of the play...quite a few other people have come to the same conclusion.”

Now Moody fixed both his regular and his magical eye on Harry. “Oh? You don’t say. So! Potter! Not beneath a little plagiarism?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean--”

“Now, now, Alastor, just because other people have thought of it before doesn’t make it plagiarism. I’m sure Harry had some original points to make as well, didn’t you Harry?”

Dumbledore looked at him, and Harry squirmed again. Nothing like having the headmaster and a professor dissecting his work in front of others...

“Well, I did notice something about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern...”

Now Moody brightened. “Yes! That’s true, you did. Pity you didn’t focus on them. I did like that; they can’t say, ‘I think, therefore I am!’ For them it’s more like, ‘I am summoned, therefore I am!’”

Dumbledore smiled and nodded. “I like that. Very Tom Stoppard.”

Harry frowned. “Who?”

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry’s shoulder, getting to his feet. “Well, Alastor, you can’t accuse him of plagiarism if he hasn’t heard of Stoppard, can you?”

Moody looked slightly disappointed, as though he’d been dearly looking forward to stringing Harry up for academic dishonesty. Dumbledore looked at Harry.

“Coming, Harry?”

“Um, yes sir,” he said with his mouth full. He picked up another piece of toast to bring with him and followed Dumbledore out of the kitchens, looking over his shoulder quickly at Moody, who was surveying his sausage with his good eye--but his magical eye was aimed right at Harry.

Harry quickly turned to look in front of him again, following Dumbledore.

They did not speak while climbing the numerous staircases necessary to reach Dumbledore's office. Once Harry was seated in one of the chairs before Dumbledore's desk, the headmaster lit the fireplace with his wand and then turned and scrutinized him with concern in his usually-twinkling blue eyes.

"Before I say anything else, Harry, you should know: Professor Snape and Sirius are both safe. Sirius contacted me as soon as they returned to Remus Lupin's, where they've been staying. Sirius told me you knew a little of what they were planning. I won't ask how you knew."

Harry closed his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief. "Then no one was killed! Oh, thank--"

"I didn't say that."

Harry opened his eyes. "I had a dream. I saw Voldemort with the Death Eaters. But it ended when he did the killing curse. My scar hurt so badly--"

"I know. Did you think no one could hear you outside of Gryffindor Tower?"

Harry looked at him, not wanting to ask, but compelled beyond any instinct of self-preservation or fear. "Who was killed?" he asked quietly.

"Karkaroff."

Of course! Harry thought. It had taken months for him to be tracked down; Voldemort would not want to take the chance that he would go unpunished. Even though he didn't get to torture him as much as he would have liked.

"Who--who was there? Was it Sirius or Snape?"

"There was a--complication. I'll let Sirius explain it to you. He should be calling any minute--"

And sure enough, there suddenly appeared in the fireplace the head of Sirius Black.

"Hello, Harry. Hello, Headmaster."

Dumbledore smiled. "Why is it so difficult for former students to call me Albus?"

Sirius colored. "Called up on the carpet too many times for that, I suppose. I'll work on it."

"Well, I promised Professor Sinistra I'd help with cleaning the tablecloths from breakfast. Must be going. You two have a nice chat," he said, as though Sirius had called to pass the time of day with Harry instead of talking to him about life-and-death issues.

When Dumbledore had gone, Harry crouched by the fire, a million questions buzzing in his brain. "Who was there, Sirius? Was it you or Snape? Which one was real? The Lucius Malfoy who was already there, or the one who came later? Where's Draco Malfoy?"

Sirius waited for Harry to settle down. "We ran into a snag, Harry. Snape was unable to procure a hair from Narcissa Malfoy. That meant that he had to transform into Malfoy and Apparate to the meeting of the Death Eaters without having me in the Malfoy house to serve as a distraction, to delay or prevent the real Lucius Malfoy from going. Our backup plan was for Snape to go a little bit later, to create the impression that the impostor had gone first, after preventing the real Lucius Malfoy from going, and that the real Malfoy then got away and managed to Apparate to the site.

"Snape had hoped he'd be able to make it in time to prevent Draco Malfoy from getting the Dark Mark, but evidently that wasn't the case. He had also hoped to save Karkaroff--we had heard rumblings that they'd finally run him to ground in Kent--but Voldemort got him with the killing curse."

"Dumbledore told me."

"As for where Draco Malfoy is now--I assume he's home with his father. After Voldemort killed Karkaroff, Snape stunned Draco, then Apparated out of there. I'm assuming that the

Malfoys still aren't clear on what happened. At least, I hope they're not."

"I saw him get the Dark Mark."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I saw everything that happened up to the killing curse. In a dream. Because of my scar. It's happened before."

Sirius looked quite grim. "I see...tell me everything you remember."

So Harry told him about Karkaroff talking about educating Voldemort's heir, and Draco Malfoy putting the Hara Kiri curse on him and saying that he and Voldemort had the same enemy--him.

"I have a thought about Voldemort's heir, Sirius."

"Which is--?"

"I think it's--Viktor Krum."

Sirius looked shocked. "Krum! Are you sure?"

"Well, of course not. But it makes a lot of sense, especially his going after Hermione, and the way he couldn't really explain how she'd gotten back after her abduction."

Sirius was lost in thought. After a minute he spoke. "Well, that won't be too difficult to check. I can probably manage to get something from his father and his mother, and from Krum. Hair or skin or some such thing. Unregistered Animagus, you know. Then we can put the samples through magical tests that will show whether those two can be Krum's parents. Snape knows how to do it. It's even more reliable than a Muggle DNA test. We'll soon know whether Krum's father isn't really his father. Although proving that Voldemort *is* will be slightly harder."

"Sirius," Harry said quietly. "I have something else to tell you. I--I told Draco Malfoy to cooperate and get the Dark Mark, to become a Death Eater. I told him to feed me information so that his dad would go to Azkaban."

"What? Harry, this isn't a game. What makes you think he did it because you told him to? This has been coming all his life; even if he'd wanted to fight it, he would have been killed. You said yourself Voldemort talked about killing him. And why should Draco Malfoy do anything you tell him, anyway? What incentive could he possibly have?"

"Well--"

"Yes?"

"A girl."

"Aahh," Sirius nodded. "Ginny Weasley?"

Harry's mouth hung open. "How did you--? Oh, yeah, that's right," he said after a moment, remembering that Snape had told Sirius that Draco Malfoy and Ginny were in the Potions Dungeon working, and Snape saying he thought Malfoy's hormones put him up to it.

"So, Harry--do you think he'll really work against his father?"

"I hope so. If Ron finds out that Ginny's involved with Malfoy, and I knew and didn't tell him..."

"You're taking a bit of a chance, aren't you Harry? He could just as easily pretend, just to get you off his back."

"Well, I have a theory--I think he didn't put the Cruciatus Curse on Karkaroff so that *he* couldn't be sent to Azkaban. He used something he knew would be painful, and that Voldemort would approve of, but he technically stayed within the law. And I think that was for a reason."

Sirius considered this. "I hope you're right, Harry, I really do. I still think you should treat any information he feeds you with the utmost suspicion, and contact me so I can vet it. Do you think

it's totally impossible he's just playing you?"

"No, of course not. But because of Ginny--I can hope."

"All right. I'll try to come visit you in person before the new year. I understand almost no students stayed at the school..." he trailed off, smiling slightly.

Harry grimaced. "Well, Hermione had this Boxing Day idea..."

"Dumbledore told me," he smiled.

"And I guess it kind of scared everybody off. Not exactly a huge success."

"Ah, well, Harry. It benefits them to have house elves toiling invisibly behind the scenes, doesn't it? You and Hermione grew up in Muggle households, and I'll wager you've done a lot more Muggle cleaning than she has, based on what you've told me about the Dursleys. She has a keen sense of justice, has Hermione. Why do you think she's in Gryffindor, and not Ravenclaw?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "I hadn't thought about it. I suppose you're right. Just based on academics, you'd think Ravenclaw..."

"And based on my behavior in school, you'd think I would have been in Slytherin," he laughed.

Harry made a face. "It's Wormtail who should have been in Slytherin."

Sirius sighed. "I'll not argue with you there. But I need to go. Snape tells me you approached him about a Dueling Club. Sounds like a good idea. Although I can't believe you asked him, of all people. Not that he wouldn't be good; I just can't imagine you two being civil to each other."

Harry smiled. "Well, if you two can do it--"

"Did I say we'd been civil to each other? Oh, damn--" His voice dropped. "He just walked in the room," he whispered, then he began speaking rather loudly again. "All right, Harry. Glad you liked your Christmas present." Although Harry hadn't said. "See you soon." And his head disappeared from the fireplace. The flames danced before Harry's eyes. He leaned back on his haunches, his arms wrapped around his knees.

....do you think he'll really work against his father?

Everything depends on it, Harry thought. Everything.

Especially Ginny's safety.

* * * * *

Harry went back down to the kitchens to wait for Hermione. The moment he walked in, he met a scene of pandemonium.

There were house elves everywhere, of all ages, scrubbing the large central table, blacking the stove, polishing silver, mopping the floor and cleaning the windows. Harry was speechless. They all worked desperately, whether because they couldn't believe how filthy everything had become in the few hours since the day had begun, or because they were going through extreme withdrawal from their cleaning addiction, Harry couldn't tell. It looked like they were all in the grip of some mass psychosis. He watched with his jaw dropped.

"Move, please!" said a squeaky voice behind him, and he jumped. An elf was trying to mop the floor where he was standing. Water sloshed into his sneakers.

"Hey!" he yelled, taking the mop from the elf, who look quite miffed, popped out of sight and appeared a second later with another mop, continuing as though nothing had happened. Harry shook his head, threw the mop aside and ran over to the large table. He pointed his wand, crying, "*Accio!*" causing the cleaning flannels to leap from the hands of the small dynamos.

Unfortunately, he didn't figure on what to do with over twenty cleaning flannels, all hurtling quickly toward him. In moments, he was covered with them and couldn't see, but they were

immediately retrieved by the elves, who resumed work. All right, he thought. The old-fashioned way. He put his wand away and started going down the table, yanking them out of the elves' hands one by one, having to fight a couple who were ready for him. But in seconds, it seemed, they all had their cleaning flannels yet again and were going at it once more. He grunted with frustration.

Dobby came running to him. "Harry Potter! Help! I isn't able to stop them! All they is wanting to do is clean, clean, clean!"

"Well, what do you think I'm *trying* to do?" he snapped at Dobby.

Suddenly, the door opened and closed behind him, and he turned to find Hagrid with Hermione, carrying a bucket and mop. She was wearing jeans, a stained blue shirt, and a bandanna tied over her hair, and she smelled strongly of soap. She looked around at the elves, and Harry saw her eyes begin to fill. Oh, no, he thought. No, no, no...

"Help me!" Harry called to them, and soon the three of them were running around the kitchen, fighting with the elves to get their mops and scrubbing brushes away from them. Hagrid was soon covered with elves who had sunk their fingers into his clothes, trying to climb up his body to reach the dustpans he was holding over his head, out of reach--until one of the elves used a hover charm on Hagrid, and he began to float toward the high ceiling.

"STOP!" Hagrid bellowed loud enough to make the castle crumble. The elves did in fact stop, but only for a split second. They looked with extreme disinterest to see who had shouted, and upon seeing, went right back to work, looking, if anything, more desperate than ever.

This, thought Harry, is a disaster.

Harry pointed his wand at Hagrid, breaking the hover charm and simultaneously bringing him back to the floor safely. When he was standing beside him again, he said to Hagrid, "You're the only one loud enough to get their attention. Say something else."

Hagrid thought for a second, then bellowed, "THE NEXT ELF WHO CLEANS ANYTHING GETS CLOTHES!"

Every elf froze.

Harry cleared his throat, wishing he knew what to say. He looked at Hermione for a second, at how miserable she appeared (she stopped wresting a large cleaning flannel from a surly-looking elf who was about a foot high). He turned back to face the throng of elves, unsure how to begin. "Elves of Hogwarts!" he cried, wincing as his brain told him how stupid that sounded. "Today is Boxing Day. You are not supposed to work! You have an excellent work ethic--no one anywhere could fault you on that! But--you have no self-respect!"

Suddenly, Harry knew just what he wanted to say, and he picked up speed and confidence, the words spilling out of him. "How much pride can you have in working when you are not free, when it's what you *must* do? What's there to be proud of in that? If you were free, and working for wages, *then* you'd have a reason to be proud! Then that would show your work ethic! If you were free, you could still work here at Hogwarts if you wanted, for wages. Families could stay together, you could have days off, you could buy yourself and your children things with your wages. And most of all--" he looked at Dobby, thinking of Lucius Malfoy. "--you could exercise your consciences. If any of you have ever served a dark wizard, you know what I mean."

He looked at Hermione, who was both glowing at him and looking like she was going to cry.

Hagrid *was* crying, blowing his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth. Harry felt exhilarated, and continued. "You each have an obligation to yourself to choose whether to

support good or evil. Voldemort has returned--” gasping from the small creatures, but Harry didn’t care “--and we wizards and witches will need your help. But it has to be given willingly, not because you’re in service. On New Year’s Day, when Dumbledore asks who wants to be free, and work here for wages, I hope you all say you will. And then, when we need you by our sides, when we’re fighting against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, I fully expect to see a mighty army of elves, willingly doing what’s right because each one followed his or her own conscience and made a choice!”

Silence.

The elves looked at each other. No one had ever said these things to them before. Think for themselves? Decide whether to support good or evil? The looks being exchanged between the elves were uncertain, confused. None of them moved to resume cleaning, however.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Dumbledore beaming at him. Moody stood by his side, a look of approval sitting very strangely on his distorted features. Harry hadn’t heard them enter the room. Dumbledore turned to the elves, saying, “Now, go play! The kitchens are in good hands! Don’t come back until tomorrow!”

Still looking uncertainly at each other, one by one, elves began disappearing, the *pops!* coming slowly at first, then picking up speed, until the sound of elves popping out of the room was almost deafening. Dobby was last to go. He gazed up at Harry.

“Thank you, Harry Potter,” he said simply, softly, his homely face wreathed in smiles. Then, with a *pop!* he too was gone.

“Your reward is coming,” Sandy hissed under his sweatshirt. That was good to know, Harry thought; usually, he felt she was so cryptic and difficult to fathom. Despite the inexactitude of this prediction, he felt it at least was an optimistic one. His reward. That had to be good, right?

“Quite the orator, Harry.” Dumbledore smiled.

Moody shook his head. “Never thought I’d see the day when I’d want house elves to be free--but you made some good points, Potter,” he growled. “Let’s say--ten points for Gryffindor. Makes up for that Lord of the Flies quiz.” Harry winced; he’d bungled that one mightily, gotten the names of some of the major characters mixed up. The week of the quiz he’d done very little studying, as it was the week he’d spent outside with the golden griffin. Now he knew what his reward was. Oh, well, he thought.

Dumbledore, Moody and Hagrid left. When the door closed behind them, Harry turned to Hermione, seeing her gazing up at him with the most amazing expression he’d ever seen on her face. Suddenly, she was in his arms, she had thrown her hands around his neck and he was holding her tightly and she was kissing him deeply. He bent over her, holding her head up to his face, her bandanna slipping off the back of her head. Perhaps *this* was what Sandy had meant by his reward...

Harry wasn’t sure how long they kissed. They finally drew their mouths apart slowly, and Hermione’s eyes bore into his in *that* way again. He smiled at her.

“If you’re going to respond like that every time I make a speech, I’m going to wind up making so many speeches you’ll get really tired of hearing the sound of my voice.”

“Well, if I ever do get tired of the sound of your voice, I know what to do,” she said, kissing him quickly again, just as they heard a loud *pop!* nearby. They turned to see a very surprised-looking Dobby. Harry thought he might actually be blushing.

“Oh, Harry Potter and Miss Hermione, I, um, oh, nevermind...” he trailed off, leaving with another loud *pop!* Harry laughed.

“There you go; we’ve actually made Dobby speechless!”

Hermione grinned up at Harry, and they both laughed.

“Come on. We have work to do.” But as they cleaned, whether waving wands or using Muggle methods, Harry couldn’t help think every time he looked at her how glad he was that she’d had the Boxing Day idea, and that it had kept most of the students away from the castle for the holidays.

* * * * *

They had an exhausting day, cleaning and cooking lunch, cleaning up again, cooking dinner, cleaning up again...

Harry changed his mind about being glad about the other students not staying. In addition to providing more hands to do the work, he thought they all could have used a taste of the work that the elves accomplished for them all on a daily basis. Maybe if they knew what it was like, more of them would have joined S.P.E.W., he thought.

Dumbledore seemed to thoroughly enjoy himself, as did Professor Vector, with whom Harry had never spent any time, and whom he liked quite a lot (Hermione seemed quite gratified by this; Harry suspected that after McGonagall, Vector was her favorite teacher). Professor McGonagall rivaled Hermione for wanting to make sure everything went just so, and Professor Trelawney spent an inordinate amount of time predicting that disaster would accompany every chore. Harry steered clear of her as much as possible; once when it was unavoidable, she said to him, “The stars have told me that we shall study augury after the holiday.” The stars! Harry sneered inwardly. She’s the professor! (Although, in his opinion, she was only nominally a professor--much the way Malfoy felt about Hagrid.)

Harry and Hermione bade the other students and the professors good night and staggered up to Gryffindor Tower. Although he had promised himself the night before that he would tell Hermione everything, Harry felt too exhausted to do anything more than give Hermione a good-night kiss on the forehead and drag himself up to his room. He took off his shirt and jeans, crawling into the bed in just his drawers, basilisk amulet and Sandy, not bothering with pajama pants. At the last minute, he remembered to take his glasses off and put them on his bedside table, then dropped off as soon as his head hit the pillow.

After a little while, the bed shook. “Wha--” Harry started to say, trying to open his eyes. All he could see was pitch blackness. But he could feel and smell someone familiar and warm getting into the bed with him, sliding under the covers; he felt smooth bare legs against his, a crisp cotton night shirt against his bare chest. He thought groggily for a moment about the fact that he was wearing only his drawers, but he decided he was too tired to care. She curled onto her side, and he curled up against her back, as he had that morning, putting his arm around her waist. He buried his face in her hair for a moment, then came up and whispered in her ear, “Why are you here, Hermione?”

“I’m not leaving you alone, Harry, not after last night. If--anything else should happen with You-Know-Who, I’m going to be right by your side.”

“You’re liable to go deaf from me screaming about two inches away from your ear...”

He heard her give a little laugh in the dark. “I’ll take my chances. I’m not going anywhere, Harry Potter. Get used to it.”

Hmm, thought Harry. I like the sound of that. He tightened his arm around her; she grasped his hand and brought it up to her lips, kissed it, making him shiver. Maybe he should stop worrying about Ron stealing her away....

She put their entwined hands around her waist again, and then they both put their heads down and were almost immediately fast asleep.

* * * * *

Harry awoke to another grey-lit morning. He rubbed his eyes, then grabbed for his glasses, surprised when they were placed in his hands. He put them on, the room coming into focus, and especially Hermione's face, inches from his.

"Good morning," she whispered, kissing him lightly.

"Good morning," he said groggily, having forgotten she would be there. She had a lopsided smile.

"Sleep well?" she asked him, putting her hand on his chest and moving it in dreamy circles. He nodded, trying not to show how her touch affected him, glad the covers were pulled up to his waist. He fingered the basilisk, watching her curiously, wondering how long she had been watching him sleep. "So," she went on, "you never sleep with shirts on anymore?" She looked at him appreciatively.

He returned her lopsided smile. "Never."

She flattened her hand now, her palm so warm against his stomach that he had to suddenly inhale through his nose and stifle a groan in his throat. "Not that I'm complaining..." she said softly, the edges of her mouth turning up slightly. But then her brow furrowed as she looked at the amulet he was touching lightly. "Do you also never take that off?"

Harry glanced down at the amulet Ginny had given him. "Just about."

"Even in the shower?" He wondered fleetingly whether she wanted to find out from personal experience...

"Even in the shower. It doesn't seem to have hurt it any," he said, inspecting it for damage.

"That's not why I asked," she said vaguely.

He examined her face; she looked terribly young, suddenly, and insecure. He knew he couldn't put off telling her the truth about everything any longer.

"Hermione," he began earnestly. "Sandy wasn't the only thing I was keeping from you. I want to come clean. You should know what's going on, because I'm probably going to need your help. The trouble is--it means keeping some things from Ron."

She grimaced. "Well, we're already doing that, aren't we? Or did you think we'd tell Ron about where I slept the last two nights as soon as he gets back? Or sooner, with owl post?"

"No, of course not. And there are *some* things we can tell Ron." He explained to her about being in the Potions Dungeon in his Invisibility Cloak (leaving out the bit about Ginny and Draco Malfoy). He told her what Sirius and Snape had said to each other, including Snape being his mother's boyfriend when they were in school. Hermione's mouth hung open in shock. Then he told her about Ginny and Malfoy getting together after she saw him in the hospital wing (and their fight in the dungeon), and how he'd found them in the conservatory at the cottage in Hogsmeade during the Christmas party. He told her about his ultimatum to Malfoy, about helping Harry to put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban. She gasped.

"Harry! You didn't!" He nodded. "But--but, his own *father*!"

He looked grim. "Ginny was shocked too. But he agreed to do it, for her."

She looked at him shrewdly. "You mean, he was all set to break up with her, and you encouraged him *not* to do it and talked him into turning on his father?" She was incredulous. Then he told her about the dream, and seeing Malfoy receive the Dark Mark, and Karkaroff

being killed and Snape getting away after stunning Malfoy.

“But doesn’t this mean that Dumbledore knows that Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater? Do you seriously think he’ll let him stay at the school?”

“He seems to be doing just that. But you know Dumbledore—he doesn’t give reasons for things. You can ask until you’re blue in the face. I asked him my first year why Voldemort wanted to kill me in the first place, and he wouldn’t tell me.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve found out, now.”

“Found out what? That I’m supposedly part of some prophecy? I still don’t know anything. What was the prophecy? And Malfoy and I are only two of the three people in this prophecy. Who’s the other one? I don’t feel any better informed than I was on my eleventh birthday when I first found out I was a wizard and Voldemort killed my parents.”

Hermione stared into space thoughtfully. “Harry,” she said softly, “do you really think Ginny is safe with Malfoy? A Death Eater? And if Ron found out—”

“Well, that’s one of those things we’re not going to tell him, isn’t it?”

She seemed uncertain. On the one hand, she had appeared encouraged that he had prevented Malfoy from breaking up with Ginny, but on the other hand, Ginny was her friend, and Ron’s sister...How was it different, Harry thought, from fixing up Cho Chang with Viktor Krum? It *was* different, he knew. This was Ginny.

Finally, he told her about the Pensieve, and about Snape giving him the password to his office.

“Have you used it yet?” she asked anxiously.

“No,” he said vaguely. He’d thought about going down the morning of Christmas Eve, and again on Christmas day, but something had stopped him. Did he really mean for Harry to be able to look at what he’d put in the Pensieve? Harry couldn’t shake the idea that he had no right to do this to begin with, it was private. “I haven’t even looked at the parchment he gave me. It’s right there,” he said, indicating a small folded wad on the bedside table.

Hermione picked it up and opened it; Harry thought of grabbing it from her, remembering Snape saying that Harry was the only one besides Dumbledore who had the password, but then he realized that if he did decide to go down to Snape’s office to use the Pensieve, he wanted to have her with him.

She was staring at the slip of parchment with a strange expression on her face. “What is it, Hermione?”

She raised her eyes to his. “Here,” was all she said, handing it to him. He took it, turned it around and read the password with a lump in his throat.

Lily Evans.

Snape was trying to tell him something. Harry both wanted to know and didn’t want to know. Learning more about his parents had been a goal of his since he came to Hogwarts, and now suddenly he wondered whether he was better off not knowing. There was still probably time before Snape would be back...he would think about it later.

Harry put the parchment back on the table, shook his head to clear it and checked his watch.

“Well, we’d better get up and go running. Didn’t do it yesterday.” His voice sounded hollow.

He swung his legs out of the side of the bed away from Hermione and walked over to the wardrobe. After standing at the open door for a moment, he glanced down and realized that he was walking around in front of her in just his black boxers. He hadn’t bothered asking her to leave, as he had during the summer. Of course, she had opened the door again after that and caught him, looking much the same as he did now.

He peered over his shoulder, seeing her staring at him. Her eyes weren't on his face, they were significantly lower. She didn't seem to have noticed that he was looking back at her. She had a dreamy smile curling at the corners of her mouth. He smiled, amused.

"Hermione!" he called softly, as though trying to wake her.

"Hmmm?" she said, distracted, moving her eyes to his face now.

"Go get dressed for running."

She smiled and headed for the door. "I was just--you've been wearing pants to run for a while, instead of shorts. I haven't seen your legs in a couple of months." She grinned broadly and closed the door behind her. Harry looked down at his legs. Okay. Didn't know girls looked at guys' legs...but then he remembered Parvati on the day she'd cut his hair. Some girls did, obviously.

He glanced at the bed, glad that he could let the house elves do the work again, and wondering what they would make of his bed, obviously having had two bodies lying in it, and Hermione's bed not being used. Then he thought of all the teenagers who had been at Hogwarts over the years, and realized that the house elves had probably seen it all...

* * * * *

Every morning for the rest of the week, Harry put the slip of parchment in his pocket when he dressed after his morning shower, thinking *today I'll go*. He and Hermione had stepped up their running; after almost six months, they could handle more, and so they were rising earlier to run for about half-an-hour longer. Each night, Hermione curled up in his bed with him. They were getting into a routine.

When they weren't outside in the snow, they spent their days with Roger and Hannah and Ernie practicing charms and hexes for the Dueling Club; they had all signed up. By Saturday, Roger was getting quite peeved with Harry and Hermione; he had yet to best either one of them in a duel. Hannah and Ernie had not bested them either, but Roger seemed to feel it was his right as Head Boy to do this. Harry sensed trouble coming, from Roger's out-of-control ego. He found himself unaccountably missing Percy Weasley.

Every so often, Sandy told him what was coming during the dueling, but she usually said exactly what he was thinking was coming. He whispered to her that he appreciated her help, but didn't need it, thanks. She stayed quiet after that.

Sunday was New Year's Eve. Following the afternoon dueling practice in the Great Hall, Harry was leaving when Hannah came running after him.

"Harry! You dropped something." She handed him the parchment with his mother's name on it. Somehow it had fallen out of his pocket.

"Oh, thanks," he mumbled, staring at it. *Just go*.

He glanced up at Hermione, who nodded at him. They watched Roger, Hannah and Ernie walk up the marble staircase, then, without another word, they walked side by side, not touching, down the stairs to the Potions Dungeon.

When they reached Snape's office door, Harry shook with nervousness. Hermione smiled encouragingly at him, but he couldn't take his eyes from the door. She gently took the parchment from him and said the password.

Nothing happened.

They looked at each other, then Hermione said, "Perhaps he charmed it so that it would only recognize your voice and Dumbledore's."

Harry nodded; he'd been thinking that too. Hoping that his voice would actually sound normal,

he prepared to say a name he realized he'd never before in his life uttered out loud.

"Lily Evans."

The door opened, creaking on its hinges. They entered, then closed the door carefully behind them. Flames sprung up on the candles on the walls. His eyes moved to the desk, to the Pensieve sitting there. He walked to it slowly, still resisting, he realized, still reluctant. Next to the Pensieve, there was a parchment. It was not directed to anyone, nor signed. It said: "Don't ask questions if you don't want answers."

Harry vaguely remembered his once saying that to Snape--or had Ron said it?--when Hermione had been trying to answer questions in Potions class that he'd been directing at Harry....He smiled. Did this mean that Snape actually had a sense of humor? he wondered.

Don't ask questions if you don't want answers.

Harry wanted the answers and didn't want the answers. He had never felt so conflicted. He was glad Hermione was there. She was being very businesslike and brisk, that take-charge aspect of her personality he especially liked when he was feeling wishy-washy and indecisive.

"So," she said, "how does this work? You've done this before."

"Well," he said, remembering the Pensieve in Dumbledore's office, "I put my wand into the--the stuff in the bowl and it started to swirl around. Then I leaned over and when my nose touched it, I sort of--fell in--"

He put his wand to the moving surface as he spoke, then bent over, shivering when he felt the cold, smooth Pensieve contents touch his skin....

Suddenly, he was falling, with a worse feeling in his stomach than when he'd ridden on Fridwulfa's hand. With a crash, he found himself sitting in a heap on the floor of the Potions classroom they'd just walked through to get to Snape's office. A second later, Hermione came crashing down onto the floor next to him. They both rose, brushing off their robes, then looked around.

Under his robes, Harry heard a hissing: "A serpent and a griffin will be allies." Sandy sounded like she didn't care for this prediction at all. He remembered her reaction to the golden griffin. Hermione gasped. Standing on the other side of the room were two students, working together at the same table, sharing a bubbling cauldron. One was a beautiful girl, about sixteen, tall and willowy, with long dark-red hair and sparkling green eyes. She smiled up at her companion, a tall, pale boy, also about sixteen, slender but muscular, with shining black hair swept back into a ponytail, and a black beard and mustache he had obviously just started growing giving his face shape and character, accentuating his high cheek bones and his lantern jaw. His black eyes sparkled down at the beautiful girl, and he returned her smile.

Beside him, he saw Hermione's shock. He didn't care for the appreciative look she was giving his appearance, especially since it was--

Severus Snape.

* * * * *

Chapter Nineteen

The Mind of Severus Snape

Harry and Hermione stood stock still, gazing at the sixteen-year-old Lily Evans and Severus Snape. *A griffin and a serpent*, was what Sandy had said. Oh! Harry's brain finally caught on. Gryffindor and Slytherin! Of course!

“Harry?” Hermione suddenly said. “Why are you hitting your forehead?”

“Oh? Huh? Um--no reason. Nevermind,” he responded, embarrassed.

“Harry?” Hermione said again, softer this time, not taking her eyes from the two people across the room.

“What?”

“Why don’t they say something? About us, I mean.”

Harry frowned. “Hermione--these are memories. We’re not really in the past. It’s not like a Time Turner.”

The realization washed over her; her eyes widened. “Oh! That’s right! So stupid--”

He patted her arm. “You are *way* too hard on yourself. The first time I was in a Pensieve I expected people to take notice of me, too. Come on, we’re probably the only students at Hogwarts who’ve used both a Time Turner and a Pensieve.”

“Sssshh!” Hermione said. “They’re saying something.”

Lily was leaning over a potions text, reading. “You know, Severus, you didn’t tell me why you wanted to make Eutharsos Potion, or what it was for--”

Young Severus Snape suddenly panicked and grabbed the book from her, putting it on the side of the cauldron away from her.

“It--it doesn’t matter, does it?” his voice shook. “Thank you for your help. I would’ve botched it, most likely.” Snape? Harry thought, trying not to laugh. “Where are--your friends?”

“They’re--off doing things they don’t want me to know about.” She sighed. “For the past year--” she began, then looked up at him, shook herself, changed the subject back to the potion. “Actually, if you’d have boiled anything but the roots, you certainly would botched it up. But you still haven’t let me read what it’s for--”

She reached for the closed book he’d set down just as he poured the potion into a beaker, straining it through cheesecloth just as Harry had done when he’d made his Eutharsos Potion.

Lily was still paging through the book, searching for the right potion recipe. He noticed for the first time that she wore a silver prefect badge; Snape did not.

Snape stared at the murky concoction and then drank it all down, just as Lily cried, “Aha! Here it is...”

But as she read, Snape began to look rather peculiar. Harry remembered the sensation of each individual part of his body going to sleep, then waking up again, and the clarity with which he could see afterward. When the young Snape shook himself and his eyes lost their glassiness, Harry could tell the potion had taken effect.

Lily was frowning, a vertical line developing between her brows. “I still don’t see why you need to...”

But Snape had put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He looked extremely determined, and his eyes burned.

“Lily,” he said in a firm voice, no longer shaking. “I have to tell you something.” He pulled her closer to him; she looked up at him, a perplexed expression on her face.

“I love you,” he said, and lowered his mouth to hers. Harry wanted to avert his eyes, but he was too horrified to move. Lily seemed frozen, unresponsive at first. Then she slid her hands up around his neck, while he pulled her closer and the fevered nature of the kiss increased...

Harry could not watch any longer; he turned to Hermione, making a face, expecting to see a similar expression on hers, but her jaw had dropped.

“Wow,” she breathed. “That’s some kiss.” Harry grimaced, closing his eyes.

“Hermione! That’s my mother! And Snape!”

“I know...” she trailed off. Evidently, the kiss wasn’t over yet.

Don’t ask questions if you don’t want answers. Yeah, yeah, thought Harry. Serves me right.

Harry turned back to them; they looked like they might be getting ready to end the kiss.

Suddenly, Lily pulled back and slapped him hard across the face.

“Yes!” Harry cried gleefully. “Go Mum!”

Hermione hit his arm with the back of her hand. Harry held his arm, pretending it hurt, grinning.

He was about to say something to her, but his sixteen-year-old mother was speaking now.

“How dare you!” she cried, backing away from Snape, her chest heaving. She pulled her hair behind her with her hands, then nervously began twisting it into a coil. She wouldn’t look at him.

He had an expression of complete and utter confusion on his face.

“She was kissing him *back*,” Hermione hissed, indignant.

“How dare I--” Snape began, confused.

“How dare you take that--that courage potion and *then* kiss me! Is that what it takes for a boy to tell me he cares about me and kiss me?” Harry thought *A boy?* Was she perhaps talking

about someone other than Snape? “I’m so sick of being treated like a disembodied brain floating around here, like I don’t exist from the neck down. ‘Ask Lily, she knows the answer.’

I’m a human being! I have feelings, and needs. Taking a potion to talk to me is--insulting. Am I so scary?” she demanded of him. Frankly, thought Harry, yes. More than a little scary.

“No, Lily, that’s not it. I was just--just nervous. I’ve wanted to say this for so long...”

“Then you should have just said it! Damn you...” she trailed off, looking like she was going to cry. He stepped closer and put his arms around her. She acquiesced at first, putting her head on his chest, then pulled away, wiping her eyes, adopting a more businesslike manner.

“You meet me under the oaks by the greenhouses in four days time, or however long it takes that potion to wear off. Don’t take any more of it! Then if you want to tell me you love me and kiss me--well, we’ll see! But don’t you touch me until that damn potion wears off!” Her eyes were blazing, and she turned and stormed out of the room. Snape stared after her, Harry thought, with a lovesick expression on his face that was--he thought of Hermione’s new favorite word--extremely un-Snapelike.

Harry looked at Hermione, who was grinning back at him. “I *like* her!” she said.

“Hmmp,” was Harry’s only comment. He had not expected his mother to be so--

“I mean,” Hermione went on, “I *totally* understand what she’s talking about!” Her voice grew softer. “Viktor was the first person to treat me like I wasn’t just a disembodied brain...”

“Hermione! I--we--I mean--”

“Sshh, Harry. I’m fine now. After all, you didn’t need a courage potion to kiss me.”

Harry remembered then that the Eutharsos Potion he’d taken had probably still been in effect on the day of the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match. Was that how he’d gotten up the nerve to kiss Ginny? He glanced at Hermione, deciding that he wouldn’t mention his own experience with the same potion. He didn’t feel like getting his foot mashed again.

But suddenly, the dungeon was dissolving in the way that Harry had experienced before, in Dumbledore’s Pensieve. There was nothing to see but smoky greyness; he could see his own body and he could make out Hermione, through the murkiness, but only with great difficulty. A whirlpool of darkness engulfed them both.

Suddenly, Harry felt solid ground beneath his feet again. Hermione was beside him once more, just as if they had not moved. They were out of doors. It was a crisp autumn day, and they

were standing near the greenhouses. The landscaping was different from Harry's and Hermione's time. There was an allee created by paired oak trees leading from the rose gardens to the greenhouses, the branches arching overhead and meeting, forming a corridor, a protective canopy, a space both indoors and outdoors. The trees were a riot of crimson and gold, cinnabar and saffron, the ground was littered with acorns and leather-brown leaves. Snape was sitting at the base of one of the oak trees nearest the greenhouses, in the shade.

"That's funny," said Harry. "These trees are huge. Why did they chop them down?"

"I remember Professor Sprout saying they used to have oaks here for potions ingredients--you know, the leaves for memory potions, the acorns for tea to help seers sharpen their inner eye--as if anything of the sort would help--the bark and roots for various medicinal purposes, and the sap as a binder for potions. But she said the oaks developed a fungus on their roots, and had to be destroyed."

Harry looked perplexed. "You obviously pay much more attention in Herbology than I do."

"That goes without saying," she said, her eyebrows raised. There she goes again, he thought.

Snape seemed nervous. Clearly, the Eutharsos Potion had worn off. At the far end of the corridor of trees, they could see a slender figure with long hair approaching, black Hogwarts robes billowing behind her. Snape watched her approach as though he were mesmerized. When she reached him, he started to stand, but she was lowering herself to the ground as he was half-way up, and he had to awkwardly fold his long legs under himself again. In fact, the two of them looked like the most awkward people Harry had ever seen. He tended to think of his mother as having moved like a dancer, gracefully. She actually moved more like a colt who had only a vague idea of what to do with so many limbs at the same time. Every movement seemed to be thought out so far in advance, it was wildly inappropriate by the time it was executed. She was just a bookish young woman who never thought much about how she appeared to others. He could even see a little of his Aunt Petunia's jawline, now that he looked. It seemed less horsey on his mother, but the resemblance was there.

However, Snape clearly thought her awkwardness was endearing; he was looking at her with undisguised adoration, obviously putting her on such a high pedestal that if it were not for the potion, he never would have said or done anything. At least with that out of the way, the ice was broken somewhat--although he looked like he wished he had more of that potion. His hands were shaking visibly.

She looked at him squarely, and said with no preamble, "Well, Severus?"

He moved his eyes down to her hands in her lap, and picked up one of them, twined his long fingers in between hers, raised his eyes to hers again. "Lily," he began, his voice catching. He cleared his throat, then tried beginning again. This is painful, thought Harry. "Lily," came the second try, "I meant what I said in the Potions Dungeon."

She looked at him reprovingly, shook her head. "Try again." But she did not remove her hand from his.

He cleared his throat yet again. Harry was actually starting to feel sorry for him. No wonder his father found it hard to approach her.

"Lily," he said louder and firmer, as though he'd made up his mind to simply get it over with. "I love you." And he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. He pulled back after the quick kiss, examining her face, waiting to hear whether he had to try yet again.

But she smiled this time, looked down at their linked hands, then back up at his face. "There, now was that so hard? I mean, without potion?" He shook his head, a slight smile pulling at his

mouth. "But that kiss," she went on, "wasn't much like the one from the other day, was it?" she said in a lower, more suggestive voice, her green eyes glittering.

Both Harry and Snape opened their eyes wide as she leaned in toward him, clearly opening her mouth.

Harry reflexively covered his eyes, saying to Hermione, "Tell me when it's over." Beside him, Hermione sighed with exasperation.

"Oh, honestly, Harry. It's like going to the movies with my little cousins. "Tell me when the mushy parts are over." Harry peeked through his fingers at her.

"You're enjoying this?"

"Well," she seemed reluctant to admit any such thing. "I suppose I'm not as invested in it. That's not my mum over there."

"And that's not my dad," Harry reminded her. "That would be different."

He dared look at them again. They were ending the kiss. Thank goodness, thought Harry.

Snape looked at her seriously again. "There's something else I want to tell you, Lily. Something no one else knows. Well, no other students. I want you to know everything about me."

His mother seemed somewhat apprehensive, as if she were unsure about the whole situation now that he'd made that statement. She didn't say anything, just gazed at him expectantly, withholding verbal judgment, and yet somehow looking rather judgmental at the same time. If she'd have raised me, Harry reflected, I wouldn't have gotten away with *anything*.

Snape went on. "I want you to know the truth, about why I avoid the sunlight, and eating garlic, and that potion I have to get from Madam Pomfrey..."

Lily backed up from him a little, pointing at him. "Sirius was right!" She looked alarmed and vindicated all at once.

"What?"

"Well, avoiding sunlight, and garlic, and going to Madam Pomfrey for potion regularly--Sirius saw it, but I didn't want to! James thought he was crazy, but--you're a vampire! Oh, my god, I let you kiss me..."

Snape's jaw dropped. "Is that what--" He looked both angry and sad. "No, Lily. I am not a bloody vampire. Pardon the pun. I have porphyria."

She looked perplexed. "Porphyria?"

"It's a liver disease. I take Porphyry Potion for it, made largely of spleenwort, with love-lies-bleeding as well. There's also a topical salve I can put on, to increase the time I can spend in the sun. Porphyria is a little like hepatitis, but it's hereditary. It's not usually found in wizard bloodlines, but I had a Muggle great-great-grandfather or something like that, and he had it. Some of the symptoms are photophobia--"

"Oh," she said, "sun-sensitivity."

"Yes. And sensitivity to the alium bulb, and all related bulbs--onions, garlic--"

"And since it's a liver disease, it affects your blood."

"Yes. So, at one time, it was thought that people with porphyria needed other people's blood. Hence the whole idea that those suffering from it were vampires."

She looked confused again. "But--there are real vampires, aren't there?"

"Oh, yes, and they can't go out in the sun either. And I do have a reflection--not that I care much for it...But they really do drink blood. People with porphyria don't, although it was assumed that they did--that we did--for centuries. And vampires are only repelled by garlic; I have a bad reaction to anything related to alium--usually the worst for me is elephant garlic and

shallots--but it certainly doesn't kill me. Neither does the sun, for that matter; I wind up looking rather jaundiced and blistered if I get much sunlight. I can't process the nutrients from it, like most fair-skinned people, who are fair to make it easier to absorb sunlight. Sun and alium bulbs just make me feel rather sick, which is what I am anyway. It's a chronic, incurable disease, both in the wizarding world and the Muggle world. It can be treated, managed, but there's no cure, and if I have children, there's an excellent chance they'll inherit it."

Lily looked at him silently, pityingly. Snape saw, and then Harry saw the Snape he knew for the first time: angry. "Don't look at me that way, Lily. Don't pity me. That's not why I told you. I just thought you should know."

"Oh, Severus," she said, linking her arm through his, putting her head on his shoulder. He looked down at her, smiling slightly, but unsure. Perhaps he's afraid she's just feeling sorry for him now, Harry thought. But he seemed to forget about that as she moved to kiss him again... Harry turned to Hermione, to have somewhere else to look. "Have you ever heard of porphyria?" he asked her. He should have known what to expect.

"Oh, yes. Some people think George III had it. You know, 'The Madness of King George.' And plenty of people suspect Vlad the Impaler had it too, you know, Vlad the Bad, in Romania. He was sort of the basis for Bram Stoker's Dracula."

"I didn't know that."

"Of course, Stoker had plenty of contact with real vampires, but he couldn't put anything in the book that hit too close to home. He was a vampire hunter, you know. A really powerful wizard, killed loads of them. Evidently, he wanted more Muggles to know what to do, too, to make his job easier, so he wrote the book as a kind of instruction manual, disguising it as entertainment. He taught Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts for a while. I read about it in--"

"*Hogwarts: A History*.' I didn't know any of that. Have you memorized that book?"

She laughed. "Not yet. Working on it."

He smiled, shook his head. Then something struck him. "You mentioned madness..."

Hermione looked grim. "Yes. Near the end of life, it causes madness. Dementia. Earlier than that, though, people with porphyria tend to be rather tetchy, you know--quick tempered."

Harry grimaced. "That explains a lot."

"Actually," she said, "this also explains why Lupin assigned us that vampire essay after Snape assigned us that werewolf essay in third year. He obviously thought Snape was a vampire all these years, and wanted us to figure it out, like I figured out Lupin was a werewolf after I did the werewolf essay. Except that it never occurred to me that Snape was a vampire because I knew I'd seen his reflection. You know, in the glass beakers and things in the Potions Dungeon. That wouldn't have happened if he were really a vampire..."

Then the world around them seemed to evaporate into the grey smokiness again, and when it resolved itself, they found themselves standing in the Great Hall.

"How long did it take you to get used to that?" Hermione asked him, clutching at her head as though it ached.

He swallowed, looking around at the familiar setting. "I'm not sure I am used to it, yet."

Hermione was still on her vampire kick. "Harry, do you suppose the first vampire was someone with porphyria who was cursed? Say, three-thousand years ago or something, a wizard had an argument with someone who had porphyria, cursed them, and the first vampire was created...?"

Harry shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Why do you suppose we're here?" He looked around the huge space. The ceiling was deep sapphire blue, with a crescent moon visible

amid a crowd of stars. The tables were all occupied; it looked like the evening meal. They went instinctively to the Gryffindor table, but the people sitting there talking seemed to be speaking gibberish. Harry saw his mother, sitting next to a blond girl he did not know, and then he saw his father, across from her, and if he didn't have his mother's eyes and hadn't gotten his hair cut, it would have been like facing a mirror. James Potter, wearing a prefect badge on his Hogwarts robes, was laughing at something a young Sirius Black was saying, seated next to him. Hermione was looking at Sirius in a way Harry didn't like, as when had she stared at the young Severus Snape. Okay, he told himself, she looked at you that way too, when you got your hair cut. Get a grip.

Seated on the other side of his father was the young Remus Lupin. Harry noticed that the backs of his hands were rather hairy for a sixteen-year-old, and that he had the most facial hair of any of the students. He leaned over his plate, shoveling in his food as though worried someone would snatch it from him any moment.

On the other side of his mother--Harry did a double-take--was the young Peter Pettigrew. Harry stared at the boy who would betray his parents and cause their deaths in just a few short years. He thought for a moment; in three years, his parents would marry, in four he would be born, and just over a year after that...he would be orphaned because of the small, insecure boy sitting next to his mother, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She was oblivious to Peter, laughing at something her girlfriend had said.

"Why can't we understand them?" Harry asked Hermione.

She shrugged, walked over to the Slytherin table, where the young Severus Snape was eating, head down, not talking to anyone around him.

"Harry, the Slytherins sound just fine. Come here."

He walked over to where she was standing. The Slytherins had several conversations going at once.

"And then I grabbed the Quaffle and did a fake to the left--" a hulking blond boy was saying to a pimply black-haired girl with olive-colored skin.

"Man, how many goblin rebellions is Binns going to rehash?" said a boy with chocolate skin and cornrowed hair. "I'm having trouble sleeping at night, I'm getting so much sleep in his class..."

"Well," said the hawk-nosed boy beside him, "maybe you'll catch a certain someone wandering around," his voice dropped, "looking for blooooood..."

Snape jerked his head up from his plate at that, fixing the hawk-nosed boy with a glare that Harry recognized from Potions class. So, Harry realized, even the Slytherins thought he might be a vampire.

Suddenly, Hermione spoke. "I know, Harry! These are Snape's memories; we can only perceive details as well as he could. Well, maybe a little better; we're really much more aware of our environment than we think we are. Important things are easily accessible in our conscious brain, but a lot of details still get stored in the rest of our brain, and we just don't normally access them."

Harry nodded; it made sense. Snape would have been vaguely aware of where the Gryffindors were sitting, but he wouldn't have been able to hear their conversations. Then Harry saw something out of the corner of his eye; he turned to see the teenaged Sirius Black creeping toward the Slytherin table with a goblet in one hand and something vaguely spherical and bulky in his other. Snape must have had a vague awareness of this--or perhaps it was because of his knowing what happened after the fact. Remus Lupin was leaning around James Potter's back to

see what Sirius was doing, a grin on his face.

When Sirius reached the Slytherin table, he tapped Snape on the shoulder. Snape whirled around, just after Sirius discreetly handed the goblet and round item to the boy sitting next to Snape, who switched Snape's goblet for the one Sirius had brought and placed the round item in the middle of Snape's dinner plate. Even the Slytherins were in on it.

"What?" Snape barked at Sirius, turning away from his plate.

"What what?" Sirius said, trying not to laugh. Snape glowered at him, then turned back to his dinner. When he saw the head of elephant garlic on his plate, he pushed it away from him in a panic, banging it into his goblet. Nervously, he picked up the goblet and gulped, but lowered it almost immediately and spit out the contents.

Blood splattered on the tablecloth and his robes, and on the people on either side of him.

"Eeeew--" some Slytherin girls complained. Snape had blood on his teeth and around his mouth. Blood. Sirius had given him a goblet of blood.

He was back at the Gryffindor table now, laughing with Remus. Peter Pettigrew tried to be a part of their joke, also laughing, but he was largely ignored by the other boys. James Potter glanced over at the Slytherin table, looking uncomfortable. Lily seemed to be trying very hard not to run over to Severus Snape and comfort him--or trying very hard to resist putting a hex on Sirius Black; Harry could see she was torn, looking daggers at Sirius and regarding Snape with a desperate expression. Snape looked over at the Gryffindor table; Lily had turned to hear something James Potter was saying to her, then James turned and met Snape's gaze, frowning.
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Harry and Hermione watched as McGonagall hauled Sirius off, saying something about a detention (Sirius looked like he thought it was worth it), and Dumbledore came to the Slytherin table to check on Snape. He put his hand on his shoulder.

"Everything all right, Severus? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?" He obviously knew about the porphyria.

Snape looked up at him with an inscrutable expression; not gratitude, not resentment at being singled out...but he shook his head, saying, "No, Headmaster. I'm fine."

Dumbledore nodded, looking shrewdly around at the other Slytherins. So much for house loyalty, Harry thought. He wouldn't trust any Slytherin as far as he could throw one. Except--Snape was Slytherin...Harry felt conflicted and confused. He was also not feeling particularly happy about Sirius.

"Well," Hermione said, "*That* was unpleasant. I can't believe Sirius--ah!" she cried, as the world slipped away from them again and they were surrounded by the grey nothingness. Harry held his breath, wondering where they would find themselves next.

When the fog cleared, Harry saw that they were standing in the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room. The fat lady in pink was slumbering in her portrait, snoring softly. Lily and Snape were standing before her, their arms around each other, her head on his chest. Oh, no, thought Harry, preparing to avert his eyes again...

Then he saw that the two of them were slightly older; his beard and mustache didn't look as insubstantial, and then he saw the Head Girl badge on her robes. They must be in seventh year now, he thought. She raised her head and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"I--oh, Severus, last night was just..."

Harry saw through the high window in the corridor that a pink dawn light was starting to appear around the edges of the clouds that were visible. Oh, god, thought Harry. They spent the night

together...

Suddenly, James Potter appeared as if from nowhere. Harry turned to see his dad whipping off his Invisibility Cloak and standing with his wand pointed at Snape, the most furious expression Harry had ever seen on anyone clouding his face.

“*Get your hands off her.*” He clenched his jaw shut again after he spoke, breathing through his nose. He wore a Head Boy badge on his black robes.

“James! Stop that! Put your wand away!” his mother scolded him.

“Great examples, your parents,” Hermione commented suddenly. “Head Girl and Head Boy, sneaking around all night.”

Harry grimaced at her. “You should talk,” was all he said. She shrugged.

“I have an excuse. You and Ron corrupted me.” She smiled now. “Kidding, Harry. Can’t you take a joke?” But Harry was thinking about the fact that she’d mentioned Ron; it might not have been conscious, but it seemed they’d been avoiding saying his name.

Lily had removed her wand from her robes and pointed it at James now. It was an eerie feeling for Harry, seeing his parents as teenagers, looking angrily at each other with their wands out. *How* did they ever get together? he wondered. He had the feeling that each could do serious damage to the other if they really wanted to.

Harry heard footsteps, and turned to see Sirius, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew coming round the corner. Lupin looked exhausted, limping slightly, leaning on Sirius. Pettigrew brought up the rear, looking nervous.

“What’s going on?” Lily wanted to know. “Where have the four of you been all night?”

James was incredulous. “What? You’re asking *us* that? When it’s obvious that you two...”

“But you do this all the time! And you never--you never talk to me about it--” her face started to crumple, and she swallowed, struggling now to stay in control. “I thought we were friends,” she said softly, seeming to direct this at James in particular. He squirmed, looked at his three other friends, then back at her.

“I can’t tell you Lily. Believe me, you wouldn’t want to know...”

Sirius looked defiant. “Anyway, shouldn’t he go climb back into his coffin?” he sneered at Snape. “The sun’s up.”

Snape moved forward and grabbed Sirius, shoved him up against the stone wall, his face a mere inch away from the other black-haired boy. “I’m tired of you, Black,” he hissed softly. “Watch your back.” Then he shook himself and stepped back from Sirius, still angry. He walked to Lily, put his arms around her and kissed her soundly, then glared at the others and strode away. As he did so, Harry and Hermione were engulfed in grey fog once more...

...only to find themselves outdoors, at night, near the Whomping Willow. “Oh, Harry,”

Hermione breathed. “Is this going to be what I think it is--?”

Harry swallowed and nodded. “I think so.”

He wished he knew what else had happened there in the corridor, after Snape left. Had his mother and father dueled? He thought for a moment that he could ask Sirius, but then he realized--no, he couldn’t possibly do that.

He searched the sky; the moon hadn’t risen yet. Where was Snape? How could they be here if he wasn’t? Then Harry spotted him; he was hiding in a clump of bushes just out of reach of the tree’s wildly flailing branches. Harry looked toward the castle; here they came, the four of them, Lupin looking quite wild already, hairier than usual, a red light in his eyes. Harry had never really seen a werewolf transform before; he hadn’t been paying attention when coming back from the

Shrieking Shack in third year, he was simply trying to get away before Lupin could hurt him or Ron or Hermione.

But now, he could watch safely, knowing there was no way for him to be hurt. The four of them arrived at the Whomping Willow, and his father found a long stick which he used to press the knot that stopped the branches from moving. Harry lifted his eyes to the night sky; the moon was rising. Lupin was looking progressively worse. He crawled into the tunnel under the branches, followed by Pettigrew. Down the tunnel, Harry could hear Lupin begin to cry out, presumably because of the transfiguration progressing. Snape leapt out from his hiding place. "So! Sneaking off to Hogsmeade in the middle of the night! A gang including no less than our Head Boy! What are you all up to? Planning to do a little breaking and entering? Or a little vandalism?" Snape looked accusingly at Sirius and James, who looked very panicky.

Sirius smiled at him; Harry thought it was the most untrustworthy smile he had ever seen. This was a very different side of his godfather. "No, as a matter of fact--well, you can go see for yourself, Snape. Just come on in and find out..."

Sirius stooped down to enter, and Snape did the same. James' breathing seemed to be irregular. Snape took his wand out before he went in, approaching the tree cautiously. He ducked down, putting his head into the tunnel, then started to move on his hands and knees into it, as the others had done.

Harry heard a low growl, a rumbling that made his hair stand up on the back of his neck. Hermione reached out and clutched at his hand; she had squeezed her eyes tightly shut. They knew Snape and the others would be all right, but somehow, being in this time and place was incredibly nerve-wracking, and Harry felt like he couldn't be sure of anything anymore. Harry heard the growling growing louder, and then suddenly, his father leapt and grabbed Snape by the foot. Snape banged his chin on a tree root as James extracted him from the tunnel, then his dad hit the knot with his wand, making the branches flail about again. Snape and James were each struck by the Whomping Willow; Snape had a gash on his forehead and a bloody nose; James had a lump on his temple. The terrible growling was very loud now, and Harry and Hermione saw what appeared to be an enormous wolf straining to get out of the tunnel, trapped by the branches across the entrance and the other limbs doing their frantic, macabre dance. The wolf was red-eyed and salivating, and as he looked at him, Harry could feel his heart beating very loudly in his ears. He thought he was probably even more frightened than when he was facing Voldemort. There was just something about the possibility of being mauled by a wild animal...even if, technically, there was no chance of its happening.

Snape was doubled up on the ground, holding his leg, blood running into his left eye, which he squeezed shut. His right eye was wild with pain. "Damn, you Potter, you broke my ankle!" James was lying flat on the ground, trying to get out of range of the tree's reach before standing. "Broke your ankle? Saved your life, more like!"

The two of them glared at each other. The growling continued.

"What about them?" Snape suddenly said to James, still sounding snappish. James looked nervous, as though he were afraid of giving too much away.

"They'll be fine. They're used to it."

"Used to being bitten by a werewolf?"

"No, you git!" James stood now, holding his arms out. "Look at me; the moon is up and I'm not a werewolf, am I?"

Snape looked suspiciously back at the growling, snarling animal still trying to get out of the

tunnel. "But how--"

"Can't you just be glad to be alive? Listen; we both need to go to the hospital wing, and you probably can't walk without my help. Here," he said, extending a hand to Snape, who looked up at him with a clear hatred on his face that was eminently familiar to Harry; it was the expression he'd seen on Snape's face on his first day of Potions when he was in first year, looking every inch like the boy who'd saved his life.

Finally, reluctantly, Snape took the hand and grunted as he stood. James put Snape's arm across his shoulders and put his arm around Snape's waist. He had to hop on his right foot, holding his left knee bent to avoid putting weight on the broken ankle, which was where James had grasped him to remove him from the tunnel before Lupin could get him.

Harry finally felt prepared for the swirling greyness when it took over this time; when it cleared, he and Hermione were in the hospital wing, the sun shining in the windows. Snape and his father were the only two patients, his father still asleep, Snape fingering the bandage on his forehead, turning to glare at the boy in the other bed. The door to the infirmary opened and Lily entered, running to Snape's bed, looking frantic.

"Oh! This morning, McGonagall said--Oh, Severus, are you all right?" She took his hand, looking at his bandaged face, then down at his ankle, still sporting another bandage to protect the boneset salve that would soon mend it.

He nodded at her, looking like he had a lump in his throat.

"What was it? You said--you said you would find out for me what they'd been doing. Did you?"

He nodded again, then said quietly, "They've been covering up for Lupin. He's a werewolf." She looked shocked. "A werewolf?" she said, almost inaudibly. "But how--wouldn't they be in danger themselves?"

"I don't know how they avoid him attacking them. But Black was going to let it--him--kill me, until Potter..."

She turned to look toward James' bed. "Yes?"

He grimaced, seemed to be unwilling to give James any credit for doing anything right. He swallowed. "Until Potter pulled me out of the way."

She turned to look at James again, who was awake now, looking back at her. He seemed very calm.

"Hello, Lily," he said simply. She gazed back at him as though seeing him for the first time.

"You--you--" she struggled. "You saved Severus' life."

He looked embarrassed. "Yes, well--if he had died, it would have made you sad," he said softly. He looked into her eyes earnestly, a pleading expression that was unmistakably full of love. Lily caught her breath, recognizing it, and looking frightened of it at the same time. His expression of love was replaced by one of misery, as he closed his eyes, turning over on his side, away from them.

Snape had seen the look they'd exchanged, and he was obviously disturbed by it; he looked hunted, threatened. Lily bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"Get some rest. I'll be back later." He nodded at her silently. She turned again to James' bed, put her hand on his shoulder; it looked suddenly like a very intimate touch, far more so than when she had kissed Snape. "I'll bring you your notes and homework assignments, all right James?"

He turned over, giving her that look again. "Thank you, Lily."

She looked like she shivered under his gaze, but it was only for a second, and then she moved toward the door, glancing over her shoulder just before she left. But she looked at James Potter, not Severus Snape.

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Chapter Twenry

Dark Deeds

Harry looked at young Snape, lying in the hospital bed, and his father, in the next bed. *If he had died, it would have made you sad*, James had said to Lily. And yet, if he had let Snape die, he would have had a clear field. He had no way of knowing that Lily wouldn't be just as much Snape's girlfriend after the incident as before. Instead, she seemed to be impressed that he had saved the life of her boyfriend with no thought of reward....That was what had changed everything, Harry thought. It was obvious. Snape's face was miserable; he glanced over at James Potter with a hatred that made Harry's blood run cold. His father was oblivious, lying back with his eyes closed, but with a very slight smile. Was he thinking of Lily?

Harry turned to speak to Hermione, but the world was changing in a swirl of grey smoke once more; Harry almost felt like it was routine, now.

They were on the Quidditch pitch. There was a game going on; Harry could see from the colors of the robes that it was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. He and Hermione were standing by the bases of the goal hoops for the Slytherin side. He searched for Snape, squinting at the crowd of people in the stands waving Slytherin banners; none of them looked like him.

"Do you see him?" he asked Hermione. She too scanned the crowd.

"No. But wait--if he were watching, wouldn't we probably be in the stands? Maybe he's playing."

They both examined the Slytherin Chasers, whizzing about on their brooms, trying to intercept the Quaffle from the Gryffindor Chasers, including a serious-looking boy with messy black hair and glasses who looked very familiar...

"There he is!" she cried triumphantly.

"Where?" Harry whipped his head around.

"Look up."

Harry shuddered, remembering when she'd said that in the forest, when they'd met Hagrid's mother. He tipped his head back and discovered that Snape was the Slytherin Keeper. That's why they were standing where they were. He was having a bad time of it. James Potter came flying down the field with the Quaffle and in a matter of seconds, it seemed, he had flung it past Snape through the center hoop, prompting the student who was doing the announcing to cry, "SCORE! And Gryffindor gets ANOTHER ten points, again thanks to POTTER! That's Gryffindor one-forty, Ssssssslytherin ZERO!"

Harry gazed in rapture at his father; he'd always wished he could have seen him in action as a Quidditch player; he'd heard so much about him. And now, here he was, flying effortlessly, flinging the Quaffle through the hoop with a casualness that belied the work involved, his red robes flying out behind him, the crowd chanting, "POTTER! POTTER! POTTER!"

Harry could see that the Gryffindor Seeker--a slight girl with hair the color of a mourning dove--was marking the Slytherin Seeker--a skinny wisp of a boy with brown hair cut too short for his prominent forehead. Both Seekers looked no older than thirteen, small and agile, but the

Slytherin Seeker in particular looked around the field sharply; nothing would miss his gaze, it seemed.

Harry saw it first; the Snitch was near the Gryffindor goal posts, not a foot off the ground. As usual when he saw a Snitch, his hand started itching to grab it. A roar went up from the crowd, and Harry looked up; his dad had scored on Snape again. The Slytherin Seeker didn't seem to be aware of this, inasmuch as he now saw the Snitch and was clearly focused on reaching it first. He didn't know that if he caught it now, the game would be a tie. The announcer started to give the score: "THAT'S GRYFFINDOR ONE-FIF--OH!" He no sooner started his announcement than his dad had scored *again*, and the Slytherin Seeker was still oblivious, still on his way to catch the Snitch. In a second, he had it in his hand, looking triumphant, flying past the Slytherins he expected to be cheering him, and looking baffled that they weren't. Then the announcer gave the final score: "THE GAME IS OVER AND GRYFFINDOR WINS, ONE-SIXTY TO ONE-FIFTY! GRYFFINDOR HAS WON THE QUIDDITCH CUP!"

His dad had scored *twice* in the amount of time it took the Slytherin Seeker to see the Snitch and grab it! Harry found himself grinning, having to work very hard to restrain himself from whooping gleefully, watching his dad come to a landing with the rest of the team as the entire school, it seemed (except for the Slytherins) converged on the Gryffindor team in joy.

A shadow passed over where Harry and Hermione were standing, and they saw Snape descending to the grassy pitch not five feet from where they stood, looking stony-faced. He was the one who had lost the game for Slytherin; he had let James Potter score those last two goals before the Snitch was caught.

In the throng of people surrounding the Gryffindor team, Harry could see his dad being hugged by his fellow red-robed teammates, and then he saw Lily making her way through the crowd, grinning at him and finally throwing her arms around his neck, as he gathered her to him and kissed her thoroughly, while people continued to pat him on the back. Harry heard one or two shouts of, "Get a room!" as their kiss continued. His mother resurfaced then, turning red, still unable to stop smiling, and she and his father walked back to the castle with their arms around each other, jostled by the crowd, and yet somehow, carving their own private space out of it. Harry looked at their departing forms with satisfaction, also unable to stop grinning. They were now a couple, he thought. All was well with the world.

He felt a hand on his arm; it was Hermione. Her face was so sad, he didn't know what had happened. "Are you all right, Hermione?" he said with concern. She drew her mouth into a line. "Not me. Snape. Look at him, Harry."

Harry turned to Snape, walked around him and looked up at his face. Although only eighteen, he now looked like the man he was accustomed to seeing in Potions class; he had shaved his beard, but there was a slight shadow on his face as though he'd forgotten that day. His hair hung in his face, lank and greasy, and his eyes were filled with a combination of contempt and sadness. He was miles away from the sixteen-year-old boy who'd declared his love for Harry's mother in the Potions Dungeon. He already looked like his life was over, like he was just biding time until some gruesome end. That, Harry thought, is the face of someone who has nothing to live for.

Snape didn't include his break-up with my mum in the Pensieve, Harry thought. But it had clearly already occurred. That morning in the infirmary must have been the beginning of the end...

Snape looked down at his hand; there were red blisters on the back. "Damn," he muttered

softly to himself. "Missed a spot..." He took a small tube out of a pocket in his robes and rubbed a salve onto the inflamed skin. He watched the throng of Gryffindor supporters making their way to the castle; there were still some subdued Slytherin supporters on the pitch, but they were avoiding Snape. His eyes slid furtively over his teammates, then he picked up his broom and walked toward the greenhouses. Harry and Hermione followed him, as there was no swirling greyness yet. He reached the shelter of the oaks and after walking a few yards away from the entrance to the corridor of trees, stopped and leaned against one of them, staring into space. Perhaps he's remembering being here with my mum, Harry thought. Then he heard a step on the path, twigs and fallen leaves being trod on, and Harry and Hermione turned to see a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, walking into the oak allee toward Snape. He looked familiar, somehow...

"Tough luck, Snape," the young man drawled. He had cornsilk-light hair and a pointed face, grey eyes that betrayed no emotion. Snape looked toward him, silent, as though he were willing him to disappear; he did not seem to want company just now. But the man either couldn't tell or didn't care.

"Remember me?" he asked, as though anyone could ever forget him. Snape spoke with almost no inflection in his voice.

"Malfoy. Seventh year when I was in first. Sorry you wasted your time coming today."

The young Lucius Malfoy smiled ominously. "Oh, it would have been nice to see a Slytherin victory, that's true. But I definitely did not waste my time coming."

Snape was not looking at him. He had taken out his tube of salve and was rubbing some into the back of his hand again. Malfoy smirked. "Is that what you do? To stay out in the sun? I wondered. It's pretty bright today; you must be glad to get away from it again." Snape looked at him now with narrowed eyes; the vampire thing again. Malfoy approached him and was now standing about a foot away from Snape, who was looking like this was making him very uncomfortable.

"Careful," he said softly to Malfoy. "Better not come too close. I get rather peaked after a match." Harry smiled; well, if people are going to think you're a vampire, might as well use it to intimate them.

Except that Malfoy wasn't. Not in the slightest. Instead, he laughed. "I brought insurance," he informed Snape, pulling a necklace with a head of garlic out of his robes. Snape immediately recoiled, backing up and putting his hand over his mouth and nose. Malfoy laughed again. "I wondered whether people were putting me on about that. I can see now they weren't. Of course, I should have known; you obviously haven't looked in a mirror in quite a while." Snape flinched at the insult, but said nothing. "I just want to talk to you. Can I talk to you?"

Snape looked doubtful that it would be that simple. "About what?"

"What are your plans for when you're done school?"

Snape looked like he didn't want to tell him, but he said in a flat voice, "Working in my uncle's apothecary in Dunoon."

Harry made a face. "Where's Dunoon?" he asked Hermione.

"West coast of Scotland. Just north of the Isle of Arran."

Harry refrained from asking where *that* was as Malfoy spoke again.

"Ah, Dunoon. The Firth of Clyde is quite beautiful, isn't it? Of course, I like Dunoon because of its bloody history....So. Uncle in Dunoon. Is he Scottish?"

Snape nodded. "My mother's brother."

“Mother’s side. Hmmm. Dunoon. What’s your uncle’s name?”

“MacDermid.”

“Ah, Clan Campbell. Good. Not Clan Lamont. Weaklings. Of course, in Dunoon, chances are you’re going to be one or the other. In all of Argyllshire, for that matter. Although anyone with sense agrees that the Campbells had it all over the Lamonts centuries ago; they let the Muggles in their clan take over much sooner than the Campbells. I’m Clan Campbell as well, on my mother’s side. She’s a Bannatyne. Glorious, bloody history, Clan Campbell. My father’s French family has almost as bloody a history--always managed to be on the winning side, whether it was the revolution, or the reversals that followed, or the Vichy regime...but no one can really touch the Scots for bloodiness, eh?”

Snape stared at him, looking like he was wondering where this was going. He did not answer. Malfoy continued, clearly enjoying hearing the sound of his own voice.

“You know what my favorite bloody story is? Takes place in Dunoon; you made me remember. The Massacre of 1646. After the Campbells hit the Lamont castles of Towart and Ascog with all they had, and the Lamonts surrendered. Our clan gave them a written guarantee of liberty. Of course the idiots believed that. They were taken to Dunoon in boats and sentenced to death in the church. Only a little over a hundred survivors. The histories say they were all shot or stabbed to death, but we wizards know it was really the killing curse did them in, except for the thirty-six “special gentlemen” who were hanged from a tree in the churchyard--I think they were half-wizard and half-Muggle. And then there was the Chief and his brothers. They were prisoners for a number of years; why they didn’t kill them, I don’t know. Of course, at that time, the Chief was still a wizard. Might have been because of that. The almost-dead were buried in the same pits as the dead. Think of it! Wish I’d have been there...”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I think we’re kindred spirits, Snape. Same house. Same Clan. And I’m hoping--same desire to serve the Dark Lord.”

Snape’s eyes widened only a little, as though he were trying to hide his surprise. “Is that what this is about?”

Malfoy stepped toward him again; Snape cringed back against a tree. “I have a job to offer you.”

“I told you; I have a job lined up,” Snape said, voice shaking ever so slightly.

Malfoy stepped back, his smile in place again. “It’s not a full-time job, although it’s an important one. You’ll still have plenty of time to--work in your uncle’s apothecary,” he said, as though he were patting a small child on the head. It was a verbal pat on the head, a patronizing sneer at Snape’s choice of job.

“What is it?”

“Do you know the boy who’s the fifth-year prefect in Ravenclaw?”

Snape looked like he was thinking about this. “I don’t really know him. I know what he looks like. Blond boy.”

“Yes. Do you know who his father is?” Snape shook his head. “Well, his father is a very important man. His father works very hard. He puts dark wizards in Azkaban. He’s always working. And his son hates him for that, among other things. His son is just looking for a way to get back at his father. But he’s only in fifth year; he’s young, doesn’t know any of the right people. That’s where you come in.”

“How?”

“You will get to know him, before school is out for the summer. Become his friend. Write letters to each other, invite him to visit you in Dunoon during holidays. I want you to become the big brother he never had. A father figure, for a boy whose father has written him off. He needs someone like you, and you can be there for him. And you have time; it will be two years before he’s done school. I expect by that time, he will be ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

“For one of these.” And Malfoy pulled up his sleeve, showing Snape the Dark Mark on his arm. Snape drew in his breath between his teeth. “You won’t get yours until then, also. Don’t want to tip off young Mr. Crouch too early. Until then you’ll be strictly an unofficial Death Eater...”

“Crouch? Do you mean--Barty Crouch’s son?”

“Yes. Barty Crouch, Jr. We fully expect him to be very useful. But we need you to--cultivate him. Make him ripe for the picking. You have two years. Should be enough, don’t you think?”

“But--his father! If I approach Barty Crouch’s son and suggest that he become a Death Eater, what makes you think he won’t report me to his father?”

Malfoy smiled. “He won’t. Not if you do your job and make him trust you completely. He’s looking for a way to get back at his father as much as we are; and we’ve decided that using his own son will work very nicely.”

Snape swallowed. “What if I refuse?”

Malfoy stepped toward him with his wand out now; Harry had not seen him remove it from his robes. “Then I will have to kill you. Fortunately, wands happen to be little pointy sticks made of wood,” he said bringing it ominously close to Snape’s heart, then pulling back. “Of course, I could just alter your memory, but that’s no fun. You’d still be walking around. I thought that a dark creature like yourself would welcome the opportunity to serve the Dark Lord.”

Snape swallowed. Harry thought, vampire or no, being stabbed in the heart is being stabbed in the heart. Fatal. He almost forgot that Snape had of course survived this encounter. Snape swallowed again, never taking his eyes off Malfoy.

“All right.” His voice was quiet and no longer shaking. And, to Harry’s eyes, he seemed to have an expression of purpose now. He had a mission, a reason to go on living, even if he couldn’t be with Lily. So, Harry thought, Lucius Malfoy recruited Snape to be a Death Eater, and then Snape recruited Crouch...Malfoy removed a stoppered vial from a pocket in his robes. “Here,” he said, tossing it to Snape.

Snape caught it reflexively, stared at the viscous red liquid inside, then looked back at Lucius Malfoy’s face.

“A gift,” Malfoy told him. He turned and walked out of the grove. Snape held the vial of blood, looking at it intently. Harry wondered whether he might actually be considering drinking it...

But as Snape walked back to the school under the oaks, he threw the vial so that it broke against one of the larger tree trunks, shattering, splattering the blood. Snape’s green robes billowed out behind him, and Harry wondered what else he would be required to do as a Death Eater...

Then the swirling greyness returned and Harry tried to find Hermione in the maelstrom, failing. When they felt their feet on solid ground again they were outside a stone cottage with a thatched roof, diamond-paned leaded windows with flowered curtains, red-painted flower boxes overflowing with plantings. A cottage garden was laid out in a complicated pattern before the house, flagstones leading from the garden gate to the red-painted front door. The lane was a dirt

path, and outside of the fenced-in garden there was only green grass--very, very green grass, like Mum's eyes, Harry thought. Like mine. There were no nearby neighbors. Something about it felt familiar to him. Something in the back of his mind recognized this place... Snape was standing next to them, also looking at the cottage. They followed him to the door and waited with him while he knocked. When it opened, Harry felt his jaw drop, not because his mother was standing there, but because she was holding a baby on her hip, a baby with a tuft of black hair and large green eyes, and--no scar on the forehead.

"Aw!" said Hermione. "Baby Harry--so cute!"

Harry grimaced and colored. "Please--"

She laughed. Lily looked surprised to see Snape.

"Severus! I--what are you doing here?"

His face was very serious. "I need to speak to you Lily. It's very important."

She stood silently, bouncing baby Harry up and down to pacify him. He was waving his arms about and gurgling, then started struggling.

"Down!" he said, still struggling. "Down down down down..."

She gave in, placing him carefully on the smooth tiled floor, on his bare feet, and he went running into the cottage, wobbling back and forth. His mother was wearing a summery dress. I must have just learned to walk, thought Harry. It must be near my first birthday.

"Severus, I don't think you should be here."

"Please, Lily; hear me out. May I come in?"

She looked reluctant, but finally stepped aside and allowed him to enter. Harry and Hermione followed. They were in one half of the cottage, the public space. Through a doorway in the rear Harry could see an addition holding a kitchen with a large, well-scrubbed wooden table, solid-looking wooden chairs gathered around it. Through two doors leading to the other half of the cottage he could see a large bed covered with a quilt, and, in the smaller room, a cot with a mobile hanging over it, stars and planets, sun and moon. He felt a strange sensation, a familiarity. This had been his home, where he lived with his parents. His home. He had come home. His mother sat on a couch that was perpendicular to the empty fireplace. Snape sat in a chair on the other side of the hearth, while baby Harry climbed up onto the couch next to Lily and starting flicking at her earring with his fingers.

"Ouch! Harry, stop. Go play; Mummy has to talk to her friend."

But the one-year-old did not get down from the couch. He sat back next to his mother, sticking his lower lip out, pouting. Hermione laughed. Harry grunted. Your girlfriend should never be allowed to see you as a baby, he thought. Under no circumstances.

But then, there was the sound of a car, followed after half a minute by another knock at the door. Lily sighed and rose to answer it, saying, "Excuse me for a minute, Severus."

Snape looked nervous about being left alone with little Harry. Although he was only twenty-one now, he looked like the man Harry saw day in and day out in the Potions Dungeon. Well, Harry thought, if he's here to try to win my mother back, he could have fixed himself up a bit.

Then there was another bit of familiarity; a voice that cut through Harry's heart, a voice he had hoped not to hear again until late June.

"Lily, mum needs you to do this! I don't care if it's illegal! Isn't it enough that Daddy died in that traffic accident last year? She's all we have left!"

His Aunt Petunia was at the door. She was only a half-dozen years older than his mother, but she also looked very similar to the way he was accustomed to seeing her. She not only has not

aged well, he thought, she did it early.

“Petunia, there’s a reason why the magical community tries to keep Muggles from knowing about what we can do. And I’m not even sure that I could help mother, even if I didn’t care about breaking the law! When witches and wizards get cancer, they usually immediately remove the cancerous cells by magic, or transfigure them, but you said mum has it all through her! How could I remove it without killing her? And I’m not permitted to anyway. Petunia, we can only prepare ourselves for the inevitable...”

Harry’s aunt’s voice shook; he’d never heard her like this. “I will prepare. You can stay here. Don’t bother coming to the funeral. You won’t be welcome. Not when you could have saved her and refused. What’s the point of you being a witch if you won’t save her? You know what you are, and that husband of yours? Unnatural. Abnormal. How can you not save your own mother? It’s just--” But Harry’s aunt couldn’t continue; she buried her face in a handkerchief and turned away from the cottage door.

“Petunia--” Lily pleaded, but he heard his aunt’s retreating footsteps, the garden gate slamming shut, a car starting up again, wheels straining to find purchase in the rutted dirt road.

His mother returned to the couch after closing the door quietly. She raised her eyes to Snape as he said, “I’m sorry if this is a bad time, Lily, but--”

“My mother is dying and I can’t do a damn thing about it and my sister hates me because of it. Is that your definition of a bad time, Severus? Because that is my definition of an absolutely *shitty* time, thank you very much.” Harry was shocked to hear his mother cursing, watching the tears flowing silently down her cheeks, finally understanding better the enmity between his mother and her sister. Little Harry had gone into his room, was playing on the floor with some blocks and stuffed toys. Hermione was looking in at him wistfully.

Lily and Snape sat opposite each other, looking down, not speaking. Finally, Snape said softly, “I came here to--to warn you that the Dark Lord will be coming for you. Well, actually, for Harry...”

She looked up at him, perplexed. “What are you talking about? Harry? What could he possibly want with Harry?”

Snape glanced toward Harry’s nursery, frowning; the one-year-old was arranging some stuffed toys in a row, an impromptu parade. He looked back at Lily.

“The Dark Lord keeps careful track of omens and signs. A seeress has predicted his downfall--she gave a prophecy which some centaurs helped interpret. The centaurs have pinpointed two of the three people involved...”

“Severus! You’re not making any sense. What is this prophecy?”

He frowned. “Let me see if I remember all of it: The Dark Lord will be defeated by a triangle: a lion, a moonchild and a flame-haired daughter of war...”

“And Harry is--?”

“Evidently, he is the lion. He is a Leo, correct?”

“Yes, but so is James. Harry was born a week before his birthday; James called it his early birthday present,” she smiled feebly. “Who is the moonchild supposed to be?”

“A family named Malfoy had a son last year a few weeks before Harry was born. July seventh. Which makes him a Cancer. Those born under that sign are also called moonchildren. I know because I’m also a Cancer.”

“And the flame-haired daughter of war?”

“The centaurs are still working on that one. The confusing thing is, some of the centaurs think

that there are doppelgangers for each of the people in the prophecy. They think that the Dark Lord will be defeated twice, that there are two sets of people who fulfill the prophecy..."

"Defeated twice? Defeated means defeated, doesn't it?"

"That's why it's confusing...But the Malfoys have struck a deal. They are promising to raise their son to be a servant of the Dark Lord. He has promised not to kill the child, for now. I came to plead with you, Lily. Strike a deal. Save yourselves and Harry. Don't try to fight--you can't win."

"What? That's why you came here? To tell me to raise my son to be Voldemort's servant?" Harry was impressed; Snape wasn't saying Voldemort's name. "How do you know all of these things, Severus? I thought you were working at an apothecary in Dunoon. How do you know about prophecies, and Voldemort coming after us? How?" She had stood and was pacing around the room nervously. She glanced into the nursery; small Harry had fallen asleep on the rug, his head pillowed on a stuffed bear. She went to him and picked him up so she could put him in his cot, but the movement woke him and he fussed. She shushed him, setting him down, giving him his bear. And then she sang to him.

It was the lullaby from the music box...

Harry listened to his mother's singing, a lump in his throat. Hermione laced her fingers through his, putting her head on his shoulder. When the lullaby was over, the baby's fussing was history; they could hear him breathing peacefully. She closed the door quietly, turned to face Snape with blazing eyes.

"You're one of them, aren't you? You're a Death Eater." Her voice was cold and assured. He gave her a look that told her she had spoken the truth. It was quickly replaced with an expression of desperation.

"I was--but I'm not now, Lily. You must believe me! I was recruited at the end of my seventh year at Hogwarts, and for two years I was--cultivating a son of an official who is very high up in the Ministry of Magic..." She looked shocked by this. "But then I heard about this prophecy, and you and James and Harry being targeted. I went to see Dumbledore, and he--he understood why I did what I did, and promised me I would not be punished, that I could be a spy, I could be useful. I haven't hurt anyone, Lily. I recruited one young man who was angry with his father, and if it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else who recruited him. Please--promise me you'll say that you'll raise Harry to serve the Dark Lord. You don't have to *mean* it! Just say it! Save your life--Harry's life--James' life. Do whatever is necessary..." She glared at him with complete and utter hatred in her eyes.

"Get out."

"Lily--"

"Get out now! Before I seriously hurt you..."

He swallowed. "If you won't cooperate, at least promise me you'll go into hiding. Find a safe place."

"Oh, we'll go into hiding, all right. Do you think we'd stay here, where *you* know where to find us? I can't believe you and I ever--ever--" she trailed off, looking sickened.

Snape swallowed, seeing her so repulsed by him. "Please, Lily. Don't push me away. I want to help."

But now she had her wand in her hand; she looked angry enough to do the killing curse. "I said get out. While you still only have two arms and two legs." Looking at her face, Harry doubted this was an idle threat. She was, if possible, even scarier at twenty-one than at sixteen, and

she'd been formidable *then*. Harry turned and looked at Hermione, yet another Muggle-born witch. Did she and his mother try overcompensate for their births? He looked back at his mother; her hair was pulled up in a messy bun at the back of her head, loose tendrils resting on her neck, her blue summer dress reminding him of the one Ginny had worn at the Burrow. She was beautiful and impressive and powerful, and no one in their right mind would cross her. Snape left reluctantly. She never lowered her wand.

The grey storm surrounded them once more, and when he could see again, Harry and Hermione were in a familiar place. The Leaky Cauldron. Snape sat at the bar, holding a glass with a very small amount of amber liquid in the bottom. He looked like there might have been quite a lot of it not too long ago. His eyes were hooded, his hair hanging in his face became a kind of mask, to hide behind. Harry couldn't believe how he'd gone downhill.

"Look!" Hermione touched his arm. She pointed toward the door to Diagon Alley. Albus Dumbledore was entering; but he was much more subdued in his facial expression and clothes than they'd ever seen him. He wore a grey traveling cloak over black robes; the cloak's hood was up, so that all they could see of his head was a sliver of his face, nonetheless recognizable. His spectacles glinted in the flickering candlelight and firelight in the pub; Harry could not see his eyes.

Dumbledore's nod to old Tom behind the bar was almost imperceptible. Tom gave an infinitesimal nod in return, and Dumbledore quietly proceeded down a corridor to one of the private dining rooms. Harry had not seen whether Snape had noticed any of this, but he now put a silver Sickle on the bar and, carrying his glass, walked quietly down the same corridor. He went to the same room as Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione following.

Dumbledore was seated at the dining table; he had taken down his hood and looked more like the headmaster they were accustomed to seeing--but even though Harry had only seen that grim look on his face a few times, he knew it wasn't a good sign.

Snape sat next to him but did not look at him. He contemplated his glass for a moment before downing the rest of the liquid, giving a small gasp and pulling his lips back from his teeth. Harry saw his Adam's apple bob twice. Snape put his glass down with a *thunk*, still not looking at Dumbledore. Another silence followed.

"Should you be drinking that?" Dumbledore suddenly asked him, in what was surprisingly close to his normal voice, despite the evidence that they were not in a normal situation at all.

Snape moved only his eyes toward Dumbledore. "No. Bad for my liver." He traced the rim of the empty glass with one long, pale finger.

Harry was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the silence. He turned to Hermione, who was watching the two men, so familiar and yet not, a perplexed expression on her face. He opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind. Dumbledore had finally broken his silence.

"How did it go?"

Snape tilted the glass, gazing into it, looking like he wished it were full again. "Not well." He stared at a spot on the wall; Harry was now standing in front of that spot, so it felt uncomfortably like he was boring his eyes right through him, as though he could see him. Somehow, it was worse than when he was wearing the Invisibility Cloak.

Snape spoke again, quietly. "I told her about the prophecy. She didn't believe me. But she understands that the Dark Lord believes it, that they're in danger. I think they're going into hiding. She--knows that I was recruited. I tried to tell her I wasn't Dark anymore, but she kicked me out..."

Dumbledore put his hand on Snape's arm. "I know you're fine, Severus. I will vouch for you before anyone who doubts that. There is a charm that will help them hide--the Fidelius Charm. I'll contact Sirius Black about it. He'll need to be in on it. They're closer to him than to Pettigrew. And Remus..."

"He's a werewolf! Do you know how many werewolves are serving *him* now? They're flocking to him."

Dumbledore sighed. "I'd like to believe Remus wouldn't do that--" he began, but he looked doubtful. "You go back to Dunoon, Severus. You've done what you can. If you hear anything, you know where to find me."

Snape nodded, looking miserable. The greyness swirled around Harry and Hermione. When will it end? Harry wondered. But he needn't have; when the fog dissipated, they were on a grassy knoll looking down into a valley; it was night, and there was only a half-moon. Starlight did very little to illuminate their surroundings. They seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. Snape was standing nearby with a young man with a short fringe of blond hair around his face, a round, pale, rather innocent-looking face. But Harry knew he was not so innocent; he recognized Barty Crouch, Jr. Snape was looking around him, apparently as confused as Harry and Hermione about where they were and why.

"Why did you have us Apparate here?" he asked Crouch, who smiled sunnily.

"So we could watch the show. Any minute now, right over there." He pointed down into the valley at a clump of trees that had smoke emerging from them; there must be a house in their midst, Harry thought. But then Crouch took in the confusion on Snape's face. "Oh, hadn't you heard? The Potters tried to hide using the Fidelius Charm, but it turned out their Secret Keeper was a Death Eater! How's that for luck? Plus, I heard that the same Death Eater got this centaur to figure out who the girl in the prophecy is; you know, the 'daughter of war.' So she'll be next. Just wait for it; should be any time now."

Snape looked wild. "You mean, they didn't move? They just used the charm? Damn! I told her to run, to go into hiding..." He seemed completely unmindful of who he was speaking to.

Crouch eyed him suspiciously. "What are you saying? You tried to tip them off? They refused to capitulate! They still don't have to die, if they agree to the Dark Lord's demands! But they'll probably be stupid and fight..."

Snape wasn't going to listen to this any longer. He began to run down the moor toward the valley. Harry and Hermione ran too, following him. Suddenly from behind them, they heard young Crouch cry, "CRUCIO!" and the curse hit Snape full force from behind, sending him down onto the ground. He flipped over, his face contorted in pain, a scream torn from deep within him, where Harry knew the torment lived, the complete and utter agony of it...

Crouch walked to where Snape was, still holding his wand on him. Finally, he flipped it up, breaking the spell, and Snape struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, panting, hatred for the boy he'd recruited showing in his black eyes as he worked to get his breath back.

Harry must have blinked then, because suddenly Snape was whipping out his wand and pointing it at Crouch, crying, "Expelliarmus!" causing Crouch to fly backwards, striking a large boulder, while his wand went flying into the air and into Snape's waiting hand. Crouch lay on the boulder, inert.

"He must be knocked out," Hermione whispered to Harry. He nodded, his heart in his throat. Snape rose a little shakily, still obviously feeling the pain from the curse. He ran more slowly than before down into Godric's Hollow. But before he had gotten twenty more feet, there was

an explosion. It distracted Snape and he twisted his ankle on the hill, falling. On the ground again, he raised his eyes to the heavens, and to Harry, his face was terrible to behold. The Dark Mark hovered over the hollow. Harry went to his knees; his legs simply could no longer hold him up. Hermione joined him on the ground, putting her arms around him. Silent tears ran down her face. Snape stayed where he was on the ground as though paralyzed; then another explosion was heard from the hollow, and an unearthly cry. It was a death rattle taken to its ultimate degree, a cry from the abyss, the roar of either an angel or a devil suffering and dying.

Snape was on his feet running again, clearly operating on pure adrenaline. They followed him down into the valley and through the garden gate. It seemed to take forever to get there. Lily lay across the flower beds before the cottage in her nightgown, that look on her face Harry remembered from seeing Cedric right after he'd been killed. Harry didn't see his father; he must have been killed inside the house...

Little Harry was wandering around the garden, his finger in his mouth, crying piteously. The scar on the forehead was bleeding, dripping down onto his nose. Snape did not show any sign of surprise that Harry was alive; he seemed to care for one thing only. Snape sank to his knees beside Lily, gathering her body to him, cradling her, as his anguished sobs competed with the baby's bawling.

"Harry," Hermione said, choking on his name. Tears were still streaming down her face. "How do we get out of here?"

He wanted nothing more than that too. He tried to remember what Dumbledore had done; he put his hand under her elbow and tried to think about rising into the air; the cottage dissolved and then there was nothing but blackness; he had the feeling again of doing a slow-motion somersault, and he and Hermione landed on their feet in Snape's cold office. But Harry didn't stay on his feet for long; he immediately collapsed onto the floor, and Hermione fell with him, holding his head while he cried for his mother, his father, even for Snape...

It felt like he had cried for a very long time. He felt drained afterward, as though he had no more tears left to use for the rest of his life. He wiped his face and put his glasses back on. He looked at Hermione; her eyes were red, her face blotchy. He assumed he didn't look any better.

"What time is it?" he asked in a small voice.

She moved the sleeve of his robe, uncovered his watch.

"After ten o'clock."

"We missed dinner." His voice didn't sound like his own. Someone else seemed to be speaking for him, saying stupid mundane things about time and dinner, as though any of that mattered. Nothing mattered. Nothing could ever be as real to him as what he had seen in the Pensieve, Snape holding his mother's dead body, his mother singing to him as a baby, his father pulling Snape away from the werewolf that was also Remus Lupin, the look in Sirius' eyes when he invited Snape into the tunnel under the Whomping Willow...

He felt like his life would never be the same again.

Harry stood shakily, and then could not remember doing it.

Nothing was real.

They walked up to the entrance hall. Harry couldn't feel his feet on the steps, the railing under his hand.

Nothing was real.

"I'll go find Dumbledore or McGonagall," Hermione was saying. She was like a television show

he was watching in the house on Privet Drive. She was as real to him as that. "Since there are so few of us here, I'm sure they missed us. I'll tell whichever one of them I find first that we were working on potions and didn't notice the time. Then I'll see if there's anything I can get to eat in the kitchens. Do you want me to get you something?"

Nothing was real.

She was trying to be helpful, trying so hard. How could she know? Harry thought. How could she know that she wasn't even here, that she wasn't even real? She probably thought she was real. She couldn't know. People who weren't real couldn't have that kind of self-knowledge... "No," came the hollow voice again. "I couldn't eat. I'm going to bed."

Nothing was real.

"All right," she was saying. "I'll see you up in the tower."

Harry couldn't remember climbing to Gryffindor Tower, speaking a meaningless password.

Nothing was real.

He went up the stairs to his room and undressed for bed. When he put his head down on the pillow, he immediately fell asleep.

Nothing was real.

* * * * *

Harry woke up. He had been having a dream. He thought it was about something he'd seen in the Pensieve, but he couldn't remember now. He didn't remember Hermione coming to bed, but she was curled beside him, breathing peacefully, as though the Pensieve hadn't happened, as though she wasn't the least bit affected by it. He momentarily hated her for that; then he remembered how he had lain down and immediately gone to sleep, and he undid that thought. He didn't hate her, couldn't hate her...

His mind felt like it was slowly recovering from the Pensieve experience. Even the little sleep he'd had had helped. They had been in there for a very long time; much longer than when he was in Dumbledore's. He thought about what he'd seen. About his mother and Snape.

Harry looked at Hermione sleeping peacefully. The clouds had lifted and moonlight spilled in through the window; the moon was full. Remus Lupin would be changing...Sirius could transfigure himself into a dog, for safety. Perhaps since Snape was staying with them, he could make some Wolfsbane Potion for Lupin. After all, Snape had to brew Porphyry Potion for himself (which was another use for all that spleenwort Sprout had given Pomfrey).

Snape had porphyria. Some things were falling into place now. Not the least of which was Snape's mental instability, his temper. And his impatience with people assuming they knew what he was all about. When he was young, rumors of his being a vampire. Now that he was older, persistent rumblings that he was a Death Eater. He couldn't win, thought Harry. And yet--here he was, working for Dumbledore as a spy.

He turned onto his back, staring up at some shadows being cast on the ceiling by the moonlight. Hermione was curled up, facing away from him. But when he changed position, she mumbled in her sleep, then rolled over, pillowing her head on his chest, throwing her right arm and leg over his body. Her nightshirt seemed very thin; he could feel her chest squashed against him, her hand brushed agonizingly over his left nipple for a split second, her knee was dangerously close to his crotch....

She was suddenly very, very real to him. Too real.

Suddenly, Snape was the last thing on his mind. Harry began to feel warmer, began to have thoughts about touching her, caressing her--no. That would be wrong. She was asleep,

peaceful...

She moaned in her sleep, mumbled something. He looked down and saw her eyes moving behind her eyelids. He thought about what he'd be likely to be dreaming about if he sounded like that, and became even warmer. Not touching her became the most difficult thing in the world for Harry. He shook with the effort of just lying still, closing his eyes, trying to will sleep to return. Sleep did not cooperate.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. This is stupid, he thought. There are four other beds in this room. I don't have to torture myself like this. He crept out of bed carefully, lifting her arm and leg from him gingerly and placing them back on the mattress. He walked over to Ron's bed and parted the curtains, pulled back the covers and climbed under them. An improvement, but his body had not yet forgotten what his mind had been thinking a few minutes earlier.

Sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep became his brain's litany. He tried an old trick of his when he was having trouble sleeping third year, when he couldn't stop hearing the sounds of his parents' deaths: he stared as hard as he could at an object--he chose the silver pitcher near the window--and tried very hard not to blink, to tire out his eyes, force them to close once and for all. He stared at it for a good minute (he counted in his head). Finally, he was starting to feel the effects of the staring; his eyes were beginning to feel like they must close or he would go insane. It probably would have worked if it weren't for one thing.

Hermione was standing now between him and the pitcher, blocking his view. The moonlight behind her made her nightshirt appear diaphanous, and Harry squeezed his eyes shut after seeing that, determined to pretend that he was asleep. He heard her approach the bed, then felt the mattress dip to one side momentarily as she climbed onto it. Go away, he thought sternly, trying to mean it. He felt the fabric of her nightshirt brush his arm. He opened his eyes; the contact had produced goose pimples all over his body. He could no longer pretend to be asleep.

"Harry?" she said softly. "Are you all right? Why did you move over here?"

"Hermione," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"I checked the clock. It's after midnight. Happy new year, Harry." She leaned over him and kissed his lips, and it would have been a quick kiss, done and over with, if he hadn't lost all pretense of control at that point and put his hands in her hair and opened his mouth under hers. That was all it took. He gave up, he surrendered. He kissed her like he was afraid he'd never kiss her again, with a desperation that was shattering. He felt like he was clutching at life after experiencing far too much death. He pulled her onto him, and now she was lying on top of him, kissing him back, knowing why he had moved. He could no longer hide from her what his body wanted; he could tell she could feel it when she broke the kiss and looked down at him with wide surprised eyes. But it did not faze her; she moaned and leaned down to kiss his chest. He shook, trying to stabilize his breathing, wanting to slow things down a little, wanting to make her happy. He pulled her face up to his again, kissing her, then moving his lips down her neck. She knelt over him, sighing, while his fingers unbuttoned her night shirt. She gasped when he continued kissing down her body, when he took the tip of one breast in his mouth, when he moved his hand up her thigh...

But then, for some reason, he heard unbidden in his head a voice, a voice that almost brought him crashing down to earth.

JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD.

She was hovering above him, her breathing matching his while his hands and mouth worshipped

her, and he could feel her starting to shake in a different way. Harry felt like he was losing his concentration, though, as the voice in his head shouted again.

JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD.

Harry froze. His heart seemed to be beating loud enough to be heard by the entire castle, by the entire countryside. GET OUT OF MY HEAD, Harry commanded the voice. LEAVE ME ALONE.

But then another voice was heard; a hissing voice. This voice was harder to ignore.

Sandy.

Damn damn damn damn damn damn, became the new litany in Harry's brain. He took a deep breath, looking up at her. He had never seen such a beautiful expression on her face, the abandonment and expectation there. If only--

But they had to stop. It wasn't safe. She looked down at him, her expression starting to return to normal inasmuch as he was no longer doing anything with his mouth or hands. "What's wrong, Harry?" she whispered.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and reached out to button her shirt for her, if possible aching for her even more than before. "We--we have to stop."

"Why?" She almost sounded near tears.

"Believe me; I don't want to," he said with a catch in his voice, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "Sandy said. There isn't much time. Do everything I tell you to do, please. No questions."

She nodded and rose, standing next to the bed, waiting for her instructions. Good girl, thought Harry. He was glad he'd told her about Sandy; Hermione knew to take her predictions seriously. It wasn't like Trelawney; there was no doubt that Sandy knew what she was talking about.

"Close all the curtains on all the beds. Hurry." They ran around the room doing this; then Harry went to his trunk and took out his Invisibility Cloak. He had her put it on and stand in the corner near the wardrobe; someone entering the room would have her behind him after taking only two steps into the room.

"Get your wand," he told her.

"Oh, Harry--I don't have it! It's in my dorm..."

"Damn!" He ran his hand through his hair. "All right, all right. Just stand in the corner there where I told you to. I'm going to get under Dean's bed with my wand and wait. That'll give me a clear shot. Okay? Are you in the corner?"

"Yes," her voice came from the right direction.

"All right. I'm getting under the bed. We don't talk any more now. Try not to make noise of any kind."

Her answer was no answer, which was fine with him. He crawled under Dean Thomas' bed, holding his wand in front of him. He lifted the hem of the coverlet up a few inches where it met the floor, giving him a view of the lower half of the door to the room. His wand was pointing toward it. He was ready.

But his brain was still playing over what had happened on the bed, on--he suddenly realized--*Ron's bed*. Damn! he thought yet again. Ron's bed!

But he found himself wishing, in spite of that realization, that they'd had more time, that they'd brought the activity to completion, so that he would have experienced that just once before dying. Would he see more than a few minutes of the new year before being killed? Would

Hermione? He saw his mother again, dead, Snape cradling her in his arms. He thought about how young his parents had died, the things they'd left undone--like raising their son... He watched the door in anticipation, wondering just how he would die, whether it would be painful. But then he shook himself; STOP THAT. I am not going to die, he told himself. I am not going to die. But as much as he would have liked that mantra to take over his brain, he found that he was unable to stop playing Sandy's words over and over in his head again... "A dark wizard is coming."

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-One

The Dueling Club

Harry felt like he had been waiting under Dean Thomas' bed forever, watching the bottom half of the door. His stomach was cold, pressed against the dusty stone floor. His right hand was shaking, trying to hold his wand steady and failing. He strained to hear Hermione breathing in the corner; perhaps it's too far away, he thought. Or perhaps it's a good thing that her breathing isn't so audible it can be heard clear across the room. He just hoped whoever entered the dorm wouldn't hear her. If only she'd brought her wand, he thought for the twentieth time since crawling under the bed. Then we'd have him outnumbered...

Finally, Harry heard a step on the landing outside the door. The moon was like a spotlight shining in the window. Harry watched the doorknob turn, heard the catch pull back, the hinges squeak ever so slightly as it opened.

He saw black robes over black trousers, black boots treading lightly on the stones. If he weren't fairly certain that he wasn't planning to use a Time Turner in an hour to return to this moment, it could have been him in his Hogwarts robes, his favorite black slacks and his black boots he'd bought over the summer. Stop it, he commanded his brain. Concentrate.

The wizard walked carefully over to Harry's bed. Harry could no longer see him. He heard the bedcurtains being pulled aside, a grunt as it was discovered that Harry wasn't in bed. The intruder moved to Ron's bed, pulled open those bedcurtains; another grunt, another empty bed. That had been part of Harry's plan; make him uncertain where to look...

Then Harry thought his heart would stop beating, he was so surprised by what happened next. The man had started walking right toward him, toward where he was under Dean Thomas' bed. But then suddenly--

The man was no longer a man.

The large black dog that had taken his place sniffed the floor and then went unerringly to Harry in his hiding place. Harry let out a gust of air, collapsing flat on the floor, relaxing his grip on his wand. The large black dog put his snout under the bed, licking his face, and Harry winced, then patted the dog on the head in a tired, half-hearted way, mumbling, "Hello, Sirius."

But the dog still didn't change back into a man; instead, he carefully sniffed Harry's right hand, moving his nose over every square inch of it. Harry was starting to feel more than a little strange. Was this Sirius? Or someone else?

"All right, Sirius. Change back already."

And suddenly, Sirius Black was crouching before him. "Happy New Year, Harry."

"Happy New Year!" Harry cried angrily, bumping his head on the underside of the bed frame. He crawled out, rubbing his head, shaking from anger and frustration and--he had to admit--

from feeling rather foolish.

“Um, Harry--why were you hiding under the bed?” Sirius asked innocently.

Harry wasn't feeling particularly charitably-inclined toward Sirius at this moment. “I was hiding under the sodding bed because I thought you were a sodding dark wizard!”

Sirius' eyebrows flew up. “What? Why ever would you think that?”

Harry drew his lips into a line and removed Sandy from his arm, holding her up so that they could talk face to face. “Sandy,” he began, “you told me that a dark wizard was coming.”

“And so he did.”

“Sirius is not a dark wizard!”

“What color is his hair?”

“Black.”

“And is he a wizard?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So. He is a dark wizard.”

Harry sighed with exasperation. “Sandy, ‘dark wizard’ has a very specific meaning. You couldn't say ‘black-haired wizard?’ Or just, ‘Here comes your godfather?’”

“What is a godfather?”

Harry felt close to losing it. “Nevermind.” He wrapped her around his arm again, then looked up into Sirius' perplexed face.

“Mind telling me what that was all about? And do you know how strange that looks and sounds, you standing there hissing at that snake, and it hissing back--?”

“Oh, um, well--you know I'm a Parselmouth...”

“I seem to remember something about that when I bought you your birthday present, yes.”

Sarcasm seeped through his words, making Harry feel foolish again.

“Well, what I didn't tell you is that snakes have the Sight.”

Sirius furrowed his brow. “Snakes? All snakes?”

“As far as I've been able to tell. There was this really big one we were studying in Care of Magical Creatures which predicted Boxing Day. She said, ‘The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.’ She also knew that no one would stay for Boxing Day. Something like, ‘Many will go but few will stay.’ Both of those were a couple of months before the events happened. Sandy's only a small snake, so she can only see a few minutes into the future, and only right around where she is. She told me a dark wizard was coming, but what she meant was a black-haired wizard, and of course--here you are.”

Sirius nodded with understanding, scrutinizing Sandy more closely than he had previously. Then he looked in Harry's face again. “Don't you think you should let Hermione come out of the corner now?”

Harry spluttered. “How--how did--”

But Hermione was emerging from the Invisibility Cloak, walking over to them and folding it neatly into a rectangle as she did so. “He must have smelled me when he was a dog,” she concluded logically. Harry hadn't thought of that. Sirius was looking at Hermione strangely, then seemed to shake himself, as though he were trying to govern unruly thoughts.

“Um, Hermione--” he said hesitantly, not quite looking at her now, but around and past her.

“Don't you think you should put on a dressing gown or something?”

Harry looked at her in her thin nightshirt; even in the moonlight, he could see her reddening, and she dashed over to Harry's trunk to put on the dressing gown she'd left there before climbing

into bed earlier.

“I don’t suppose we could have some light in here, could we?” Sirius asked. Harry nodded and waved his wand at the candles. Sirius sat down on Ron’s trunk and Harry sat on his own.

Hermione looked uncomfortable.

“Going to the loo...” she mumbled, practically running for the door.

Sirius’ gaze stayed on the doorway even after she was gone. Still looking in that direction, he asked, “Harry, what exactly did I interrupt?”

“Interrupt? What makes you think you interrupted anything?” Harry’s voice sounded unnaturally high to him.

Sirius fixed him with a gaze that would have done Mad-Eye Moody proud for producing squirms. Harry looked away. “Hermione has been sleeping up here, yes. Ever since I had the dream about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and my scar hurt me. She didn’t want to leave me alone. But look!” he said, pulling back the bedcurtains of his bed, and then Ron’s. “Two beds slept in. Two!”

Sirius gave him a Do-I-Look-Like-An-Idiot Look. Harry faltered momentarily.

“Regardless of how many beds have been slept in, I know what I smelled when I was a dog Harry. It’s pretty unmistakable.”

I would have a dog Animagus for a godfather, thought Harry. He grimaced and sat again, giving up with a sigh. “Okay, that was what you interrupted...but it’s not like we’ve been--you know. Up until tonight it’s been strictly sleeping...”

Sirius frowned. “Harry--do you mind my asking whatever happened to your *other* girlfriend?”

Harry had forgotten about mentioning Cho to Sirius. So now he had to explain about her and Viktor Krum...When he had done so, Sirius nodded with understanding.

“It’s not that I’m passing judgment, Harry--I had enough girlfriends in school--but I just want to give you a suggestion.” Harry thought of how many times in his life he’d wished for parents, and how a parent was the last thing on the planet he wanted just now. But he nodded as Sirius went on. “There’s this thing called Prophylaxis Potion. Madam Pomfrey will give it out to any girl who’s in fifth year on up. One dose lasts six months, and you--well, the girl--can take as much as six doses at once, so it can last up to three years. Works the day after, too.”

Sirius looked at him significantly, as if hoping Harry understood the slightly cryptic statement so that Sirius wouldn’t have to be any more specific. Harry nodded.

“I’ve heard of that potion. Made with spleenwort. Speaking of which--how did you and Snape and Lupin get on? Tonight is a full moon, too.”

Sirius grinned. “Snape wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. We left while it was still light. But he did make some Wolfsbane Potion and left it for Lupin. He’s probably back in his own Snapish quarters already...”

Harry decided it was his turn to make Sirius uncomfortable. He looked so harmless, so amiable and avuncular, sitting there on Ron’s trunk. How could he be the same young man in the Pensieve?

“So. You didn’t give Snape any goblets of blood?”

“Goblets of--did he tell you about that?”

“Well, in a roundabout way,” he said, figuring that was a reasonably accurate description of having found out about it while he was in the Pensieve.

Sirius looked down at his hands. “I’m not proud of some of the things I did when I was young, Harry. I mean, I even made a pass at Lily once...”

“You what?” Harry yelled, as Hermione came back into the room, clutching her dressing gown at the neck to hold it closed more securely.

Sirius laughed. “Didn’t work. You should have seen my face afterward--she must have put three different disfiguring curses on me in very quick succession. Hard to reverse that kind of thing. It was a month before any girl would consider looking at me again.”

Harry laughed. Hermione sat down on the trunk next to him. “What did I miss?” she wanted to know.

“Oh, um,” Harry said, stalling. Sirius leaped into the breach.

“Harry said you’d been sleeping up here, keeping him company. I thought I would sleep up here, too. Why don’t you each use the beds you were already in, and I’ll pick another? We should all get some rest.” He looked very pointedly at Harry, who couldn’t keep looking back without feeling very, very guilty.

Harry went to his own bed. Looking a little uncertain, Hermione went to Ron’s. Sirius chose Neville’s bed, and they were soon all ensconced behind their bedcurtains, calling goodnight to one another, and Harry put his wand through the curtains to extinguish the candles.

He laid back, trying to fall asleep again, thinking about Hermione lying on the other side of the room, and what had almost happened. Perhaps it’s for the best, he reasoned, trying to convince himself. Although it was good to know Prophylaxis Potion would work the day after...

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione rose to run as usual, waking Sirius briefly to tell him where they were going. He nodded groggily and turned over, going back to sleep. When they were returning upstairs after the run, they came to a halt suddenly when Dobby *popped!* into view before them on the third floor, near the girls’ prefect bathroom.

“Harry Potter! Harry Potter! And Miss Hermione! I is looking for you all over the castle! I is telling you good news!”

Harry just wanted to get to the shower. “What is it Dobby?” he said wearily.

“Nine house elves is asking Dumbledore for clothes today!” Dobby looked ecstatic. Hermione had been looking excited when he started talking, but now her face fell.

“Nine? Just nine?” she said softly.

Dobby didn’t notice her disappointment. “I is thinking it is what you was saying on Boxing Day, Harry Potter! That is what I is thinking!” Dobby was practically bouncing off the walls.

Hermione looked like she felt she had failed. Harry was torn between responding to Dobby’s joy or Hermione’s attack of self-doubt.

“Um--thanks for telling us, Dobby. We’re each going to the showers now, though...”

“Thank *you*, Harry Potter! Thank you!” Dobby cried, grinning, and then *popped* out of the corridor again. Harry was able to turn to Hermione now, but she evidently didn’t want words of comfort or reassurance. She went to the portrait of the shepherdess, gave the password, and entered the bathroom without a word to him, looking like she was about to cry. Harry grimaced; he knew they couldn’t have expected many house elves to want clothes right away, but nine did seem like rather a small number.

When he arrived at the boys’ prefect bathroom, he discovered that Snape wasn’t the only one who had returned a day early to the castle. The luxurious marble room had been deserted for the previous week at this hour--Roger and Ernie seemed to use it later, or at night--but as soon as Harry opened the door, he was confronted by someone he hadn’t seen since his dream on Christmas night.

Draco Malfoy.

“Um, hello,” Harry said, taken by surprise. Malfoy had evidently already bathed and was wearing a green Slytherin bathrobe and shower shoes from the wardrobe. He smirked at Harry. “What’s the matter, Potter? All your blood permanently left your brain from spending so much time shagging Granger?”

Harry was speechless, his mouth hanging open. Finally, he managed to stutter, “We haven’t-- there’s been no--”

Malfoy looked terribly smug now. “Oh, my mistake. Didn’t figure Granger would be such a tease. I see. All your blood must have left your brain from all the wanking you’re doing, while *thinking* about shagging Granger...”

Now Harry felt his face redden. He stopped trying to address the lewd things Malfoy had been saying (and tried not to think about them himself) and return to what he’d originally meant to say.

“I was going to ask if you were all right, but I don’t know why I should bother being nice to you, you insufferable git.”

Malfoy made a mock sad face. “Aw. That hurt. Is that the best you can do?”

But Harry had had enough. He grabbed Malfoy’s left hand and pushed up the sleeve of the bathrobe. “I was asking because I saw you get *this*, you sodding bastard!” The Dark Mark showed vividly on Malfoy’s pale skin. “And I saw Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on you, and saw you put the Hara Kiri curse on Karkaroff before Voldemort killed him.”

Malfoy looked suddenly terrified. “Saw me--? How? Were you--were you the one impersonating my father?”

“No, you idiot. I can’t Apparate yet.”

Malfoy looked at him with narrowed eyes. “But you know who it was, don’t you?”

“Maybe I do. It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, if someone goes around pretending to be my dad and then stuns me, I think it’s my damn business! And you still haven’t said how you saw those things. Were you impersonating someone else there?”

“No.” Harry pointed to his scar. “It links me to Voldemort. I’ve had dreams when he’s been feeling especially violent or murderous; the dreams show me what he’s doing, what’s happening where he is. I had a dream on Christmas night. But when he did the killing curse, my scar hurt so bad I woke up. I wasn’t sure who had gotten killed. For a little while, I thought it might be you...”

Malfoy tried to recover his cockiness, but it was half-hearted. “That would have made you happy...”

“I was afraid Ginny would think it was my fault. But it’s a moot point, now. You’re alive and kicking and as obnoxious as ever.”

“How touching that you were concerned.” He smiled evilly. Harry’s ire was up, and he was finding it harder and harder to control the urge to put a really good hex on him.

“So,” Harry said. “Your father will probably tell you what’s going on now, when Voldemort summons the Death Eaters. He’ll have to tell you, since you can’t Apparate to him from Hogwarts--since you can’t Apparate at all, in fact.”

“What makes you think I can’t Apparate?” Malfoy said softly.

Harry frowned. “But--you’re not old enough. You can’t get a license until you’re of age. It’s illegal otherwise.”

Malfoy smiled--or at least, what passed for a smile for him. "And you think I would have a problem with that?"

Harry swallowed. He should remember to stop making assumptions about what Malfoy would and wouldn't do. Working at learning Apparition before he was legal was probably small potatoes for him.

"Anyway, even someone who can Apparate can't do it on the grounds of Hogwarts. So, whenever your father tells you what happened at one of the Death Eater meetings, send me an owl and I'll meet you to get the information."

Malfoy laughed, shaking his head. Harry stared at him; had he cracked? Had Voldemort used the Cruciatus Curse on him for too long?

"You're really funny sometimes, Potter, you know that?" But suddenly, his face was anything but funny. Harry remembered how grim he had looked when he had cursed Karkaroff.

"Let me tell you how this is going to work," Malfoy went on. "I am going to go about my life, going to classes, eating, sleeping, corresponding with my father, playing Quidditch, and--oh, yeah--snogging with Ginny as much as humanly possible. If I hear anything incriminating from my father, I'm keeping it to myself until such time as I have enough information to get him locked up in Azkaban properly, where the bastard can't get me, and with a guarantee from the Ministry of Magic that I will be immune from all prosecution and absolutely safe. You will not know anything. Up until the moment my father puts the final nail in his own coffin, you will be completely in the dark. We are not friends. We will not correspond, or meet, or even be civil to each other, understand? I'm running the show now, and you just have to live with it."

Harry stared at him. "What? That's not what we agreed to..."

"I don't give a damn what you think we agreed to. I'm holding all the cards, Potter. And Ginny too, who is very nice to hold, thank you very much. We're doing this my way now."

Harry swallowed. "I don't know about this--I'd rather know what your father's up to before someone I care about gets hurt. How do I know you're actually going to do this? How do I know you're not just playing me? How do I know I can trust you?"

Malfoy smirked again; he put his hand on the doorknob, preparing to leave.

"You don't."

He was gone.

Harry found himself pacing back and forth on the cold marble floor, running his hand through his hair. He was at the mercy of Draco Malfoy, and he didn't like it one bit. Something about this was making him very, very nervous. It didn't feel right; it was a recipe for disaster. What if Malfoy had no intention of following through, what if he just wanted to be with Ginny and make Harry *think* he was going to turn in his father? He thought of Ginny, kissing Malfoy in the conservatory at the Christmas party...If Malfoy helped put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban, the Weasleys could probably forgive Harry after the fact for not telling anyone about Ginny and Draco Malfoy. But if he was lying...

Some of his closest friends--probably his best friend--would be wanting his head on a platter.

* * * * *

Sirius met with Dumbledore before leaving; Harry loaned him his Invisibility Cloak to go to the headmaster's office. That evening, the rest of the students returned on the Hogwarts Express, and sleeping arrangements for Harry and Hermione returned to normal. It felt strange to be eating dinner again at the Gryffindor table, crowded with students chatting happily about the Christmas presents they'd received and what they'd done on holiday. Harry listened but didn't

listen to Ron, who talked so much during the meal it was unclear to Harry whether he'd actually eaten anything. At bedtime, Harry was afraid Ron would notice something amiss with his bed, but the house elves had, as usual, put fresh linens on it and placed a warming pan between the mattress and coverlet. To Ron, everything was normal.

Luckily, the first day back was a Tuesday. Tuesday wasn't bad; Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, History of Magic and Divination. The golden griffin was gone; now they were onto snow sprites, because they were in season. They raced around the lawn near the lake, snow crunching under their boots, trying to catch the tiny flying creatures, who would warm their hands for a few seconds before flying off again. It wasn't easy; they blended in with the landscape so completely. Harry was amazed that these small beings who looked made of ice could be so warm.

For Herbology, they were now in Greenhouse Five, which felt uncomfortably like a tropical jungle. They took off their robes, but were still sweating profusely while wrestling with the magical kudzu which had tripled in size over the previous week; pruning it back was very dangerous, and twice it caught Ron around the neck and tried to cut off his air. When they left, he was rubbing his neck, muttering something about bringing weed killer next time.

History of Magic was basically naptime, not that Binns ever noticed, and then Divination was canceled because Trelawney had taken to her bed with a cold, "Which the stars told me would occur today." They knew she would be better by Thursday, however, so they enjoyed the reprieve while they could.

It was Wednesday that Harry was dreading.

Harry was not looking forward to returning to Potions, unsure of how to face Snape, now that he'd been inside the Pensieve. Suddenly, everything that had happened during the holiday seemed to have occurred a very long time ago...

When he walked into the Potions Dungeon for the first class of the new term, Snape barked at him, "Potter! In my office!"

Harry looked at Hermione; she raised her eyebrows and shrugged. This still seemed like vintage Snape. No difference.

Harry went into his office; Snape left the door open. To Harry, this seemed calculated. He noticed that the Pensieve was no longer on the desk; Harry couldn't see it anywhere. "So, Potter. Did anyone use any potions ingredients while I was gone?"

Harry looked him in the eye, trying to see the man from the Pensieve. "No, sir."

"No one entered my office at all?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. "I did, sir."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" His face was still inscrutable. Harry thought he knew what he was asking.

"Actually, sir, a bit more. Not that that's a problem."

Snape assessed him through narrowed eyes. "I am now changing the password again. The one I gave you before will no longer work. If you want something from my private stores, you will need to ask me. Now return to your station." Snape's voice now seemed uncharacteristically quiet.

"Yes, sir," Harry said clearly, crisply. They were not going to talk about the Pensieve now; perhaps they would never talk about it. But Snape knew Harry had been in the Pensieve, Harry was sure of it. That was enough for now.

Harry went through the rest of Potions--indeed, most of the rest of the day--still feeling like he

was in a dream, that the Pensieve had been reality, not this. Snape seemed unchanged in some ways, and yet--Harry knew he could never see him the same way again.

Then, in Defense Against the Dark Arts, he woke up.

Moody was finally going to start teaching them something practical. It's all very well and good to contemplate what makes people turn Dark, thought Harry, but it's another thing to be able to deal with dark wizards. However, as it turned out, they were not going to be learning mind-body dissociation yet. First, they were going to be learning some marginally-legal curses, and putting them on each other. Hermione was shocked.

"Now, now," Moody growled at her scandalized face. "Madam Pomfrey knows to expect all of you near the end of class. Just a precaution I thought I'd take; end it early, let everyone go to the infirmary. None of you will be permanently injured, and none of you will be feeling anywhere near as much pain as you get with Cruciatius. But you've got to know a little about what pain is before you learn to block it. These are curses no one else is going to teach you; they don't transfigure anything, and to call them charms would be a misnomer. They're curses, hexes. They're designed to hurt. Now, some of you probably know a few such spells already, in spite of the fact that you've never actually had these things assigned. And I understand a few of you have signed up for the Dueling Club; these will be especially handy for you. All right, pair off as follows: Brown with Finnigan, Granger with Longbottom, Patil with Potter and Thomas with Weasley. Alphabetical; easiest way to start."

Moody had cleared the center of the room of desks. The four pairs stood facing each other, wands at the ready. Parvati looked nervous, Harry thought, her large brown eyes seeming even larger than usual. She preferred Divination class, he knew. He hoped he wouldn't hurt her too badly. It sounded like Moody was going to have all of them writhing on the ground.

"What I'm going to teach you today is the Passus Curse," Moody announced. Harry whipped his head around; Moody noticed. "Know that one, do you Potter?"

"Uh, no. I know of it. I know you have to specify the body part."

"That's right. Directed pain. Specifically aimed. Good for a surprise, a shock, since it actually doesn't last very long. Or, sometimes it's done in the one spot repeatedly for maximum effect. That way, it can even be fatal. I once hauled in a dark wizard who had attacked a man's kidneys with Passus so many times in quick succession, he died of renal failure." The students looked around at each other with alarm. "Of course, we won't be doing anything like that today." He sounded like he was saving *that* lesson for a special treat, Harry thought, sincerely hoping that he was wrong.

"We'll start with the hands and arms. Hand--say '*mano suo.*' Upper arm--say '*lacerto suo.*' Entire arm--say '*bracchio suo.*' Then follow that with '*passus est.*' Got that? But don't tip off your opponent which one you're going to use. Element of surprise. And you must concentrate; think of the targeted body part, think of the most intense pain you can. Focus! We'll start with this side--" he said, indicating Seamus, Neville, Harry and Ron. Facing them, Lavender, Hermione, Parvati and Dean looked more than a little apprehensive.

"At my signal," Moody said to them. Suddenly, red sparks flew from the tip of the wand Moody was holding up above his head.

Harry pointed his wand at Parvati's right hand, crying, "Mano suo passus est!" She screamed and dropped her wand, holding her hand, bending over and squinting her eyes, clearly trying not to cry. Harry dropped his wand, going to his knees, putting his hand on her back and his face close to hers, whispering, "Are you all right, Parvati?"

She raised glistening eyes to his, biting her lip, shaking her head. He took her hand in his, massaging it, warming it, and her eyes gazed back at him again, reminding him of how she'd looked after she'd cut his hair. He shook himself and looked away, stood up again and released her hand. He saw that Ron was frowning in their direction, and Hermione too. Hermione was clutching her left upper arm, rubbing it vigorously, while Neville repeatedly apologized. "Oh, Neville, stop! That was good, really. We're all going to be doing a lot of this; can't get squeamish..."

Ron had gone back to watching Dean flex his left hand. Ron looked apologetic. Dean's face was screwed up in pain. Lavender was on the floor, holding her right arm, crying. Seamus was bumbling around, patting her awkwardly on the head, saying, "There, there."

And Malfoy's dad does this to him all the time, Harry thought. No wonder he didn't fall apart when Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on him. Then Harry remembered that Malfoy *did* ask him not to do it again; Harry had refused to do the same thing. Of course, Malfoy was supposed to be playing the role of an obedient Death Eater. Hopefully, it *was* just a role...

Moody clumped around the room, shaking his head. "People, people! One little curse, and you all fall apart! That was nothing! On your feet, everyone! I'm sure you're all thinking, These are my friends. I've known them since we were sorted together. We eat every meal together, go to our classes together, relax in the same common room. And now I've got you attacking each other. And you don't want to. But you've got to learn! You must disconnect yourself from your emotional ties to the person you are attacking. Yes, I'm the meanest son-of-a-bitch you've had teaching you. I know that. But this is what's necessary to make sure you are properly prepared. What do you think the O.W.L.s will be like? Think no one will get hurt taking those? Think again. NOW! The other side. Positions! On my signal!"

This time, Harry was on the receiving end of the pain. Parvati had pointed her wand at his left arm, crying, "Bracchio suo passus est!" and pain had started to blossom from his elbow as though he had rammed it into a brick wall with all his might. He gritted his teeth against the pain, trying to tell himself it wasn't so bad. And after a minute, he actually seemed to believe it. When he thought back to the Cruciatus Curse, and when he had first started transforming into a griffin, it really wasn't so bad. He felt like his heart was beating faster than before she had cursed him, but other than a residual throbbing, he felt he'd managed the attack rather well.

Ron wasn't doing so well. He was biting his lip, holding his left hand with his right, doubled over, red-faced, stifling cries in his throat. On Harry's other side, Neville was doing somewhat better. He was rubbing his right arm, wincing, but despite the fact that Hermione had attacked his wand arm, he hadn't dropped it. He smiled feebly at Hermione through the obvious pain, saying, "That was good." Hermione looked stricken; Neville was the last person she ever would have chosen to hurt. She looked like *she* was the one who was going to cry.

Lavender had apparently had no such scruples about attacking Seamus. He was rubbing his left upper arm, saying, "Ah! Ah!" repeatedly and turning in a circle, stamping his left foot hard as he turned, as if he could channel some of the pain down through his leg and away from him.

"All right!" Moody barked, ignoring the reactions of those who'd just been cursed. "Finnigan, Longbottom, Potter and Weasley, you stay where you are! Brown, Granger, and Patil, you each shift down one and Thomas, you come up here with Finnigan. All right! The first side will go again. On my signal!"

And so it went. Harry tried not to think at all as he cursed Hermione's left hand; he tried to choose the smallest target he could, and didn't want to hurt her right hand so she'd still be able

to write (she was working on a three-foot essay for Binns). She in turn looked at him stony-faced when it was her turn to curse him. But he could see the look in her eyes after she'd done it, the remorse and empathy. He smiled feebly at her, holding his right upper arm, breathing through his nose.

Moody had them go through every possible combination. At last, Ron and Harry turned to face each other.

Harry went first again. He knew Ron hadn't been handling the pain well; he'd been watching him the whole time. He dreaded adding to that hurt, and then wondered whether he was just thinking about physical pain...

"Mano suo passus est!" Harry cried, pointing at Ron's left hand, as he'd done with Hermione. But to his surprise, Ron managed to grit his teeth and stamp his foot a few times (a la Seamus) before looking like the pain had subsided.

Harry waited for Ron to curse him back. He gazed at his best friend, remembering being on his bed with Hermione, feeling guilty. After the red sparks came out of Moody's wand this time, Ron didn't attack him right away. Harry looked to his left; Seamus was being cursed by Neville, whose voice, speaking the curse, had an authority Harry was still getting used to.

Since he hadn't been paying attention to Ron, Harry was unprepared for the curse when it came. Ron had pointed his wand at Harry's right arm. The pain that suddenly radiated through his limb made him drop his wand, and he tried to blank his mind, stop the transmission of the pain to his brain, convince himself he didn't feel any pain at all...This isn't so bad, a voice in his head said. He almost felt like he was floating, although it was different from the Imperius Curse. This was something he was doing, he was in charge of it...it felt lovely, actually...

When he opened his eyes, he discovered the whole class looking at him, and Mad-Eye Moody was in particular peering into his face.

"You did it, didn't you Potter?" he growled. Harry swallowed, gazing back at his lopsided, gruesome visage. "You got sick of the pain and started working out a way to block it on your own, didn't you?" Then one of his unnatural-looking smiles spread across the damaged terrain of his face. "What do you need me for?" he joked in a growl. "You've got me beat. Couldn't have done that at fifteen if I'd been offered five-thousand galleons and a go at the Queen Mum." They all stared at him, shocked. "Oh, come on. When she was young, she was quite a dish."

That made them finally break up into laughter, only to be stopped short by their physical pains. The laughs turned into almost universal moaning and groaning. Harry was the only one who didn't seem to be rubbing sore muscles and wincing. Moody dismissed them and they all went trooping off to see Madam Pomfrey for pain relief.

As they approached the hospital wing, Ron looked sideways at Harry, who realized they hadn't really had a proper conversation since he'd come back. A conversation being something that didn't consist of Ron talking at him all through a meal. He hadn't told Ron about the dream on Christmas night, for instance.

"Should have known you'd be the first to do that, Harry. Like when you overcame the Imperius before anyone else." Somehow, Ron sounded more resentful than impressed.

Harry decided to change the subject. "On Christmas night, I had a dream and woke up with my scar hurting," he whispered. How should I do this? he wondered. And then he knew; he would simply tell Ron about the events at Dover in as straightforward a way as possible, no hint of Malfoy possibly being willing to betray his father. If Ron suddenly started treating Malfoy

differently, that wouldn't look right. Plus, he couldn't know that Malfoy's incentive for turning in his dad was his own sister.

Ron didn't react at first. Then, quietly, without inflection, he said, "Tell me later." Harry nodded and they all proceeded to the hospital wing. Harry would have to think very carefully about everything he said, since he was going to have to leave Ginny out of the conversation entirely. Ron could not know about her and Malfoy. Plus, he would have to be sure to leave out the bits about Hermione sharing his bed after the dream. He would have to edit himself very carefully. The problem with lying, he thought, is that you have to make sure you tell the same lies in the same way to the same person each time. It was almost more trouble than it was worth.

Almost.

* * * * *

The rest of the week, all of Harry's classes seemed to pass in a blur. Learning Augury in Divination was like doing tea leaves at the beginning of his third year; only now they were staring at the disgusting entrails of a dead chicken and interpreting the future based on that gory mess. How enlightening, Harry thought. And--surprise, surprise--Trelawney said that the entrails predicted his untimely death. Must be death from boredom, he thought. The only time he really felt alive and alert was in Moody's class.

They progressed to producing pain in the legs, using separate incantations for thigh, knee, foot and ankle. Harry was getting better at blocking the pain, even though they technically weren't on that yet.

As he was leaving class on Friday, a large eagle owl came flying down the corridor and landed on his shoulder. He had a note tied to his leg.

"Meet me in the Trophy Room in half an hour," it said in a small, angular script. There was no signature. Harry turned it over and over, trying to figure out whether to go or not. Ron and Hermione looked at him, waiting for him to say what it was. He shrugged and acted like it was nothing. He decided to get his Invisibility Cloak and go early to see who it was.

When he entered the Trophy Room in his cloak, no one was there. He wandered around the edge of the room, looking idly in the glass cases, smiling to himself when he saw the Award for Special Services to the School that he and Ron had received second year. Then he saw the award Tom Riddle had received. Why had he never noticed before that it had the same name? And it was also connected with the Chamber of Secrets. Harry remembered that Ron had had to clean slime off it after burping slugs all over it..

He probably could have brought Sandy, to warn him of what was going to occur, but he didn't want someone to hear her hissing under his clothes, so he'd left her in the common room near the fire. Harry heard a step behind him and turned to see Draco Malfoy looking around furtively. It was ten minutes before the appointment time. What was Malfoy up to? Harry wondered. He waited to see what Malfoy would do, but he just wandered around the edge of the room as Harry had done, looking at the awards, grimacing when he came to the one Ron and Harry had received, muttering, "Special Services..."

When the appointment time had been reached, Malfoy looked at his watch impatiently, saying softly, "Come on Potter, half an hour..." and Harry knew that Malfoy had in fact sent the note; he didn't just happen to be wandering in the Trophy Room at the same time. Harry had been walking very softly about five feet behind Malfoy as he had circumnavigated the room, but now he came to within a yard of him and said in a low voice, "I've been here for twenty minutes, you stupid git."

Malfoy looked around wildly. "Potter?"

"Who else?"

"Where are you?"

Harry moved a few feet to Malfoy's right. "Where I can see you, but you can't see me."

Malfoy looked really hacked off now. "Cut it out, Potter."

Harry kept moving as he spoke. "Come on, Malfoy. You're the one who asked to meet me. Taking a chance, aren't you?"

"It's important."

"Anyway, you said you didn't want us to be seen together."

"I also don't want one of the teachers calling my dad to take me to St. Mungo's because I'm standing around in an empty room talking to myself."

Harry laughed softly. "I dunno. Sounds like fun. You'd probably be exempted from end-of-year tests."

"Very funny."

"I thought so. Are you going to get to the point or not, Malfoy?"

Malfoy turned to one of the glass cases, his back to the door, speaking softly. "What did you say to Moody?"

Harry was thrown. "Moody? What did I say about what?"

"Christmas night!"

Harry was baffled. "I didn't say anything to him. What are you talking about?"

Malfoy drew his lips into a line. "Then if you didn't, who did?"

"Will you please tell me what you're on about?"

Malfoy sighed. "He's been down on me since the new term started..."

"That's only a few days."

"It's enough. We've been doing the Passus Curse--which as you know is one of my favorites," he added sarcastically. Harry grimaced. "He keeps asking me whether I would like to push up my sleeves to work, and he specifically pats me on the left arm, right where the mark is. I'm convinced he knows I've got it. How else would he know if you didn't tell him?"

Harry was about to say that Dumbledore also knew about it, but realized that he couldn't reveal that Dumbledore had sent Snape undercover, and that if they had been able to manage it, Sirius would have been undercover in Malfoy's own house. Then he thought about it, and knew why no one had needed to tell Moody about Draco Malfoy having the Dark Mark...

"Malfoy, what are your robes made of?"

"I dunno. Wool for the winter, I suppose. Why are you changing the subject?"

"I'm not. And what kind of shirt are you wearing under your robes?"

"Cut it out, Potter, and tell me--"

"*What kind of shirt?*" Harry breathed in a fierce whisper.

Malfoy snorted through his nose. "Linen, I suppose. Something my mum thinks is elegant.

Luckily, it gets softer with wear. Pretty scratchy at first. Can we get back to the subject?"

"This is the subject. Unless you're wearing something with sleeves made of--I don't know, lead or something--Moody has no trouble seeing that mark on your arm. And for all I know, he can see through lead."

"What are you on about now?"

"Moody's magical eye. All last year, you had Crouch teaching you, masquerading as Moody, and you never picked up on the eye? He can see through wood, fabric, the back of his own

head--and Invisibility Cloaks. We better hope he doesn't come in right now, else he'll think I'm a Death Eater too, sneaking around under my cloak to talk to you." Harry wondered why Malfoy didn't know about the eye. Maybe Moody (the real one) didn't want the Slytherins knowing about what he could see?

"You mean, he can see right through my clothes?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean, Malfoy. If he can see your entire body, beats me how he keeps from spewing up his lunch..."

"Sod off." Malfoy said half-heartedly, trying not to speak too loudly. Harry laughed softly.

"Actually, he was really giving Parvati the willies at the Yule Ball. I think she thought he was being a dirty old man, looking through all the girls' clothes at their bodies..."

Now Malfoy smirked, and it looked to Harry like he was harboring some very dirty thoughts himself. "It'd almost be worth losing an eye if the replacement lets you see Parvati Patil's body..."

Harry was shocked. "You want I should tell Ginny you said that?"

Malfoy looked around, panicked. Harry thought he might have forgotten that he was actually talking to another person, that he wasn't engaged in an interior monologue. "I did *not* say that. I will deny it with every breath in my body."

Harry laughed. "It's okay. I won't say a word. It just means you have a pulse, anyway."

Malfoy actually smiled, still looking in the awards case. "What, did you get some action at the Yule Ball, Potter?"

"Malfoy! Why are you always so interested in my private life?"

Malfoy shrugged. "It irritates you when I ask. How can I pass that up? Too much fun. Even when I can't see you." Malfoy sighed, moving on to another award case. "But I don't know what to do about Moody..."

"Deal with it by being exactly what he thinks you are: one of the new generation of Death Eaters. I happen to know that other Slytherins in your year have parents who are involved with Voldemort. Maybe they'll look up to you again if you show them the Mark. You want deep cover, you've got it. Do your best to come off as Dark and evil as possible. Shouldn't be too far a stretch for you..."

Malfoy grimaced. "I'll have you know Ginny thinks I'm a prince."

Harry laughed. "Maybe if she's lucky, the next time she kisses you, you'll turn into a frog. It would be a move up."

"Ha ha."

But as far as Harry was concerned, the conversation was over. He went to the door of the room, preparing to leave. Malfoy spoke softly, said something he couldn't hear all the way from the doorway. Then, from the corridor, Harry heard him say more loudly, "*Potter? Damn you, where did you go?*"

Harry left, smiling. He thought, *St. Mungo's, here you come...*

* * * * *

At dinner on Friday, Snape announced that the Dueling Club would be meeting for the first time Sunday after lunch in the Great Hall. The first twenty students who signed up were to stay after the meal was over.

Harry looked forward to Sunday afternoon for the rest of the weekend. More than once, Ron or Hermione had to shout at him to bring him back from a reverie in which he had caused Malfoy to revert to his bouncing ferret form during a duel...

At long last, Sunday afternoon arrived. The members of the club remained in the hall. Harry looked around--plenty of familiar faces. The usual suspects, plus a couple of people he didn't know all that well, just from prefects' meetings. Harry already knew that Roger, Hannah and Ernie had signed up, as well as George and Angelina and Malfoy with his erstwhile sidekicks, Crabbe and Goyle. Harry Ron and Hermione were the only Gryffindors in their year. Alicia had also signed up, and Ginny and Colin were the only fourth years from any house.

Harry noticed Hermione avoiding Millicent Bulstrode, the only girl from Slytherin who was present. At the Dueling Club in their second year, she had gotten into a wrestling match with Millicent instead of dueling properly, and then had mistaken a hair from Millicent's cat for a human hair; when she had tried to use the hair in some Polyjuice Potion, intending to take on Millicent's appearance temporarily, she had instead sprouted cat whiskers and fur. Harry didn't blame Hermione for avoiding Millicent. There were many bad associations there.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was the only other Hufflepuff besides Hannah and Ernie. And almost all of the Ravenclaw prefects had signed up except for Roger's brother Evan: Mandy Brocklehurst, from fifth year, Liam Quirke from sixth year (Harry tried not to stare, after mistakenly walking in on him and Justin at the cottage), Liam's sister Niamh, who was seventh year, and Cho. Harry did a double take. He hadn't realized Cho's name was on the list. Just when I thought I could avoid her during Sunday afternoons, he thought.

Snape had apparently planned everything out in minute detail. Harry figured he'd probably done this while staying at Remus Lupin's; otherwise he might have been forced to engage in an actual conversation with two people he'd actively disliked for twenty years--and who had once tried to kill him (although it wasn't Lupin's fault).

He had a long list of combinations of duelers. By his calculations, it would take four meetings for all of the members to duel with each other once. Only one duel was to take place at a time, and then the rest of the club would vote for the winner by sending sparks up from their wands. If it seemed close, an exact count would take place.

"That's a total of one-hundred and ninety duels!" Hermione whispered to Harry and Ron, doing the math quickly. They nodded at her, as if they'd figured it out too.

Fifty duels would take place during the first meeting. After the first twenty-five, there would be a half-hour break. If they were lucky, they would be done by the time the school starting trooping into the Great Hall for the evening meal. Everyone in the club would duel five times with five different partners. Snape said he would post the standings in the entrance hall in the morning. Harry was itching to get started. He hoped he would be dueling Malfoy.

Snape swept the tables out of the way with his wand, leaving the center of the room clear. After this, he suddenly barked, "Abbott!" Hannah jumped, then stepped forward, looking nervous. "V. Weasley!" Harry was perplexed. Who was that? But then, Ginny stepped through the crowd, and Harry realized the V was for Virginia.

Snape had them bow to each other. Ginny looked very calm; Hannah looked like she was wondering why she'd thought this was a good idea. She'd been the same when they'd practiced dueling during the holiday.

Ginny disarmed her within seconds, returning her wand to her afterward, then flushing as she received a unanimous decision from the rest of the club, and returning to the ring of students that had created an ad hoc arena.

Ron was up next. He faced Mandy Brocklehurst, whom he did not know at all. He stunned her before she could do anything, netting the Weasleys another win. Snape revived her afterward.

George had more of an actual duel with Millicent, but after he had done the Jelly-legs Jinx on her and she had cemented his feet to the floor, he quit fooling around and disarmed her. The Slytherins voted for her, Malfoy making remarks about George being in love with the floor, but everyone else voted for George, so he got the win.

Harry apprehensively watched Alicia confound Cho, then disarm her. He wondered whether it would be good form to vote for Cho even though she clearly lost; then he remembered that he was not supposed to be nice to her anymore, and abruptly put up his wand for Alicia. Cho gave him a hurt look.

He was up against Crabbe next. Harry quickly disarmed him, feeling that it hadn't been much of a challenge. Then Malfoy beat Colin Creevey, Ernie defeated Niamh and her brother Liam was trounced by Roger. Angelina and Hermione then won over Justin and Goyle respectively. The first round was over. Each of them had dueled once.

The second time around, Ron and George won again, this time against Hannah and Mandy. Then after Alicia disarmed Millicent, Harry's name was called again. He moved to the center, waiting for Snape to call the name of his opponent.

"Chang!" She stepped forward, smiling at Harry, who was frankly aghast. He'd been looking forward to going up against Malfoy; it hadn't occurred to him that he might have to duel Cho. So now in addition to voting against her in her duel against Alicia, he had to try to beat her himself. Beastly behavior, he reminded himself. He wondered for a moment why he ever thought it was a good idea to use her to help rid Hermione of Viktor Krum.

After they bowed, Harry waited for her to make a move. She seemed so small and delicate, so young in spite of being a year older than him. Then he shook himself. Beastly behavior, he thought, coming right up.

"*Mano suo passus est!*" he cried pointing at her right hand. She cried out, dropping her wand, then holding her stricken right hand with her left, bent double, crying. He fought the urge to go to her, to make sure she was all right. The club members looked appalled; no one else had done such a painful curse yet, not even the Slytherins, and Harry had done it to his *girlfriend*, as far as most of them knew. No one could argue that he'd disarmed her, so he should have received a unanimous vote--but the Ravenclaws all voted for Cho, glaring at him. It wasn't enough to give her the win, but that wasn't the intention. They voted for her to demonstrate house loyalty. And tonight, he thought, I have to go to a prefects' meeting with all of them. What fun.

By the time the break came, Harry had also disarmed Millicent, George had defeated Hannah, Hermione had won over Justin, and Malfoy had also beaten Cho, as well as his once-loyal retainer, Crabbe. Ginny had defeated Goyle with the Impediment Curse, slyly walking up to him while he was moving in slow motion and removing his wand from his grasp, then returning him to normal speed. He stumbled, tried to curse her, then saw that she was holding two wands while he had none. The vote was unanimous, even including the Slytherins. Harry thought he saw Malfoy smirking, trying not to look proud of Ginny.

When they returned from the break, the dueling resumed with a new fervor. Harry had broken the pain barrier, and now the duelers were going at each other more fiercely, with no regard for friends or house loyalties. Malfoy was not at all nice about the way he beat Millicent, and even Hermione seemed quite ruthless about the way she trounced Colin.

Finally, the first meeting was over. Fifty duels! thought Harry. He'd seen some good spells he'd not known about, and had gotten off a couple of good ones himself. When he and Hermione came downstairs to run in the Great Hall the next day, Harry saw the parchment on the wall and

went to it immediately, finding his name quickly.

Rank: 1 / Wins: 5 (Tie): Granger, Malfoy, Potter, Spinnet, V. Weasley

Rank: 2 / Wins: 4 (Tie): G. Weasley, R. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Crabbe, Davies

Rank: 4 / Wins: 2 (Tie): Johnson, MacMillan, L. Quirke, N. Quirke

Rank: 5 / Wins: 1 (Tie): Bulstrode, Chang, Finch-Fletchley

Rank: 6 / Wins: 0 (Tie): Abbott, Brocklehurst, Creevey, Goyle

Harry couldn't help but grin. Hermione pulled him into the Great Hall, laughing at him. "Come on. You're going to get a swelled head. Five of us are in first place, you know."

"But--somehow I didn't even notice..."

"You didn't notice that you didn't lose any duels? Of course," she said slyly, "it's not like you were really challenged. At least I went up against Roger..."

Harry snorted. "And beat the pants off him like you did every day of the holidays. Actually, I though Niamh might be able to take you."

Hermione looked perplexed. "Me too. She's seventh year and all. But she was easier than I thought she'd be...she seemed a little distracted." Harry remembered that she had been watching her brother Liam, who had been standing next to Justin whenever they weren't dueling. Not touching, just standing. A little tension in the Quirke family, perhaps, he thought. "Ron did pretty well," Harry noted, while they stretched. Hermione nodded, not speaking. He wondered whether she was feeling the kinds of guilt pangs he'd been experiencing in reference to Ron. He didn't feel like he could ask her, though. What would he say? 'Oh, by the way, are you really in love with Ron and feeling guilty for being half-naked on his bed with me?' Harry frowned; there was no way they could talk about Ron, and yet his presence was always with them, even when they were alone, their arms around each other...

They'd managed to be alone a few times since the new term had started, just a handful of minutes here and there in an empty classroom, just some stolen kisses. Harry had considered saying something about Prophylaxis Potion, but had no idea how to do this. What if she hadn't been considering doing more on New Year's Eve? He would feel like a complete idiot.

Harry looked forward to the next Dueling Club all week. He learned some more curses in Moody's class, and was researching some more on his own. He wanted to have a really good one for Malfoy when it was his turn to duel with him.

However, Harry didn't really feel like he had any challenges in the second week of the club. He handily defeated Goyle, Justin, Roger, Niamh and Colin. Roger was getting to be quite annoying when he lost a duel. Harry had to keep reminding himself that this was the git who was Head Boy. What did Fleur see in him? he wondered. He didn't have to wonder what Roger saw in Fleur.

When the standings were posted the next day, there were a few changes of status for some people who weren't at the top of the rankings:

Rank: 1 / Wins: 10 (Tie): Granger, Malfoy, Potter, Spinnet, V. Weasley

Rank: 2 / Wins: 7 : R. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 6 (Tie): Johnson, L. Quirke, G. Weasley

Rank: 4 / Wins: 5 : Davies

Rank: 5 / Wins: 4 : Crabbe

Rank: 6 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Goyle, MacMillan, N. Quirke

Rank: 7 / Wins: 2 (Tie): Bulstrode, Chang, Finch-Fletchley

Rank: 8 / Wins: 1 : Abbott

Rank: 9 / Wins: 0 (Tie): Brocklehurst, Creevey

Harry remembered watching Ginny dueling. She was pretty nice to Colin, actually, using the Impediment Curse as she had before to painlessly disarm him, and she did the same with poor Mandy, who hadn't won a single duel. On Crabbe, she actually used the disarming charm; it was impressive to see him flying backwards into Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode, who happened to be standing behind him. She did the same thing later to Millicent, who glared at Ginny afterward.

The duel that had him a little worried was Ginny versus Cho. Cho knew nothing of Ginny's erstwhile crush on him, but Ginny's attitude toward Cho...all Harry knew was that she'd been pretty upset about seeing them kissing. Of course, that was several months ago, before she and Malfoy had crossed the line and become more than friends.

Ginny managed to get her curse off first. "Reverso!" she cried, aiming her wand at Cho. Cho stopped in her tracks, looking baffled. Then she turned around, and, her back to Ginny now, she took aim, it seemed, at the students standing directly in front of her. Ginny came up behind her swiftly, plucking her wand from her hand even as the students Cho was facing started back away apprehensively. Cho looked surprised to find her wand gone; Ginny pointed her wand at her again, saying, "Finite Incantatem!" Cho blinked and turned around once more, finding Ginny behind her, holding both wands.

When Ginny was standing between Harry and Ron at the perimeter of the circle again, Harry asked her quietly, "What was that?"

"Oh, it made her think that what was in front of her was behind her, and vice versa. One of the Confundus-class charms."

Harry smiled; he had something similar in mind for Malfoy, but just a little more disorienting. He hoped he'd get to duel with him the next week.

Hermione also dueled with Cho that day, disarming her quickly, without fanfare. She also defeated Crabbe, Millicent (she looked very smug about this), Mandy (she looked somewhat guilty about this), and Hannah. Malfoy also defeated Hannah, as well as Goyle, Justin, Roger and Niamh. Ron had no trouble defeating Niamh, Colin and Cho, but Crabbe dodged his curse and then disarmed him, and Millicent Bulstrode looked over his shoulder with wide eyes, as though he should be worried about something there, and then caught him by surprise when he foolishly looked.

Somehow, Harry thought that that just seemed to sum up Ron; not seeing what was in front of him, and convinced he had to look over his shoulder to see something interesting.

* * * * *

There was a Quidditch match on Saturday between Slytherin and Hufflepuff, but Harry didn't feel much like going. Justin didn't seem to be as good a Seeker as Cedric had been, and Harry didn't want to see Malfoy gloat over his victory. He suggested to Ron and Hermione that they practice dueling instead. Ginny didn't come; she said that Justin was her friend, and she wanted to go to the match to show him support. Harry made a face; and almost said, "Since when is Justin your friend?" He knew that Justin wasn't the Seeker she'd be watching at the match.

The first person Harry had to duel at the third meeting of the Dueling Club was Alicia. Like him, she had a perfect record so far, plus she was two years ahead of him and Head Girl. He'd seen that she was good; but he'd also seen her weaknesses. Well, he thought, only one of us will still have a perfect record after this.

He knew that she dropped her guard when she thought the duel was over. He decided to take whatever she dished out--short of the disarming charm, which he knew he could dodge. All that running had come in handy, giving him good, fast reflexes. She wasn't going to be nice, he knew, as soon as he heard her start to say, "Talo suo--" He braced himself for what was to come, having gotten quite good at it. "--passus est!" she cried. But Harry only felt a slight twinge in his ankle before he bowed his head and felt his mind begin to soar, floating free, unable to comprehend corporeal pain any longer. He felt almost as if he were hovering above his body and Alicia's, another kind of spectator to the duel, like looking down into the Pensieve before entering it.

He was actually back much more quickly than he realized. He snapped his eyes open quickly, took aim at Alicia and cried, "Expelliarmus!" She flew backward into Roger and Colin; Colin did not seem to mind, blushing a bit as he helped her up, but Roger seemed to think it undignified to have the Head Girl fall on top of him. He made a face at Harry, and when he held up his wand to vote for him, he looked reluctant, as though he wished he could vote any other way, if it were plausible.

Liam Quirke was easy for Harry to disarm with Impediment, and he was looking forward to his next duel. After about nine more pairs squared off, Snape called his name again, and then the name of his opponent.

"Granger!"

Harry froze. He knew he would have to duel with Hermione at some point, but he hadn't wanted to think about it. So far this meeting, she had defeated Angelina and Ernie (being very nice about it). They bowed to each other and began. Harry looked at Snape out of the corner of his eye. Was he enjoying this a little too much? Pitting them against each other? But then, friends had been dueling friends for two weeks, and even boyfriends and girlfriends and siblings. He knew this was coming; in the anticipation of wanting to put Malfoy in his place, he had somehow overlooked that fact.

Hermione hit him with a tickling charm, something he had *not* been anticipating. He stubbornly clung to his wand, so he would not be counted as disarmed, and he put the Reverso charm on her that Ginny had used, making her turn around in confusion, and coming dangerously close to hexing the spectators; then he used Impediment to slow her down, and, still laughing from the tickling sensation, took her wand away from her. Snape ended both spells, and the club voted. It was close, inasmuch as he'd been unable to dodge the tickling charm, but he had disarmed her, so after a 10-8 vote, the duel went to him.

She smiled sheepishly at him. "Good one, Harry," she said softly, when they were back in the circle. He smiled back at her.

"You too. Sneaky, that." She laughed softly, and Ron clapped him on the shoulder, startling him. He looked up at him guiltily.

Ron didn't notice anything wrong. "And just when I thought someone was going to break your winning streak..." he said, sounding very disappointed that this hadn't occurred.

Ron had lost to George during the first round; he had also already lost to Angelina and Hermione, which was probably one reason he had hoped Hermione would beat him. (Although Harry had thought Ron didn't look like he was trying terribly hard to beat her.)

After the break, Ron's was the first name Snape called. Then he announced Ron's opponent. "Potter!"

Harry groaned inwardly; this was some day, he thought. Dueling with Hermione, and now Ron.

And although he and Ron had practiced together, it wasn't the same as being in front of eighteen other students who were going to judge one of them to be the winner--and one, the loser. Harry decided to use the charm he'd been saving for Malfoy. He could always use it again. They bowed to each other, and Harry again let Ron go first, prepared to dodge whatever he would throw at him.

"Bracchio suo passus est!" Ron cried, aiming at Harry's right arm. As soon as he heard Ron start, though, he didn't bother dodging; this was his method of dodging, in a way. He felt the free-floating sensation again, felt his mind drifting, then the return to reality. Whenever he returned from that strange, almost dream-like state, he felt even more alert, as though he'd taken some kind of pill or potion to enhance his awareness of the world.

He immediately pointed his wand at Ron, saying, *"Inverso!"*

Ron's eyes went wide; he started looking down in a panic, then up, then began turning around in a circle, crying, "Stop it, Harry! Take it off me! Let me down!" Harry crept up to him, plucked his wand from his hand, and said, *"Finite Incantatem."* Ron had his eyes closed; then he opened them slowly, seeing Harry standing before him, smiling apologetically and holding his wand.

Harry received another unanimous vote, and once they were in the circle again, Ron whispered to Harry, "What was that?"

"Ssshhh!" Harry hushed him. "I was saving that for Malfoy, but I couldn't think of anything else just then. Sorry. Don't tell anyone what it was like, okay?"

Ron nodded, looking somewhat annoyed about it, though. Next up were Hermione and Ginny. Harry didn't know who he wanted to win. Hopefully it would be decisive, so there wouldn't be a tallied vote. If he just went with the crowd, whoever lost couldn't get mad at him, could they? They bowed and readied their wands. Hermione aimed the Passus Curse at Ginny's foot; wincing, Ginny did the Reverso on Hermione, but Hermione, perhaps having rethought her reaction to this after Harry had done it to her, resisted the temptation to turn around. Still, she looked like she was fighting blindly now, staring straight at Ginny without being able to see her. She took general aim and the snaky ropes that flew from the end of her wand bound Ginny's arms to her side; then Hermione looked like she had a thought, and she threw herself down onto the ground, lying on her back. She smiled; now she could look up to see Ginny. The Reverso charm would no longer disorient her. She confidently aimed the disarming charm at her while Ginny was struggling with the bonds around her body, catching Ginny's wand as she lay on the floor. Ginny, still bound, flew backward into George, Angelina and Ron, just missing Harry. The four of them helped her up (they were all getting used to people flying backward at them whenever someone used this charm) and then Snape broke the spells both girls were under and the club voted.

It was a tie: a 9-9 vote; Harry had wanted to vote for Hermione, but somehow his wand went up for Ginny. He didn't know whether Hermione noticed. Snape broke the tie, giving the duel to Hermione since she had succeeded in disarming Ginny. She had also apparently found a good way to work around the Reverso charm (if you didn't mind dueling from a prone position). About ten more pairs dueled, then Snape called, "V. Weasley!" again, followed by, "Malfoy!" Hmmm, thought Harry. If Malfoy was trying to protect Ginny during the Quidditch game, what's he going to do now? And if he throws it, will she ever speak to him again? He thought of the lose-lose situation Malfoy was in with pleasure; this was almost as good as dueling with him personally.

They bowed to each other and took up their positions. Ginny didn't move; neither did Malfoy. It seemed like every breath in the hall was momentarily suspended, waiting. Then suddenly, Ginny simply cried, "*Expelliarmus!*" and Malfoy went flying back into the Slytherins, knocking them down like tenpins. But in spite of the unanimous vote, Ginny did not look happy. He'll have hell to pay later, Harry thought happily.

Another dozen or so dueling pairs faced off, and then Snape called "Malfoy!" again, followed by, "Potter!"

Harry stepped forward; he'd been waiting for this. Malfoy joined him in the center of the circle, eyes hooded, face expressionless. They barely bowed, watching each other the entire time.

They stepped back, wands at the ready, circling each other. Most other duelers jumped right in before this point, but they waited and watched each other.

Suddenly, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry his face like a storm cloud, snarling, "HARA KIRI!"

Harry heard Ron and Hermione gasp; they knew it was what he'd done to Karkaroff, since now they both had heard about the dream. Harry couldn't help going to his knees; oddly, his own wand looked to him like a long, curving knife. It was quite beautiful, with a fork-tongued dragon etched down the side, the handle being its tail. He'd never seen such a beautiful knife. It was so beautiful, he knew he just had to plunge it inside himself..

He rammed it into his mid-section on the lower left, feeling his insides shudder with the invasion of the cold metal. He drew it across his abdomen; the finely honed blade met no resistance, but sliced through him cleanly, surely, beautifully. He looked down at his sliced robes, now dark red with his blood. Then it happened; his insides started spilling out of him, and a river of blood, and suddenly the pain hit him, the excruciating pain, worse, if possible than the Cruciatu Curse had been....

No, a voice in his head said. *This is not real*. He remembered Moody saying, "*It's only pain.*"

He closed his eyes and repeated that over and over, *it's only pain it's only pain it's only pain it's only pain...*and he felt himself floating up again, seeing himself kneeling on the floor with his eyes closed as if in prayer, Malfoy standing over him with a satisfied look on his face. Harry looked down again; his robes were deepest black, uncut. His wand in his hand was his wand again. He was all right and he knew it. He looked up at Malfoy, narrowing his eyes.

"*Inverso!*" he cried, pointing his wand at Malfoy from his position on the floor. Malfoy responded as Ron had, only even more so.

"*Aaah!* What the hell have you done to me, Potter! Get me down now! I'm going to kill you!" and he turned in circles, looking up, as though that were where Harry was. Harry stood calmly and reached out and plucked his wand from him.

"Finite Incantatem," he said calmly. Malfoy screamed as the spell terminated, then rubbed his eyes and looked around frantically, seeing Harry in front of him, smiling.

"*Nice try, Malfoy,*" he said softly so the others couldn't hear. "*But the thing about using that kind of curse on me is--I know the pain isn't real.*"

Malfoy looked at him, alarmed, as though he had metamorphasized into an otherworldly creature. Actually, thought Harry, that's the face I usually get from Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. How odd.

The vote was cast, and the duel went to Harry. The Slytherins had voted for Malfoy, but it wasn't enough to matter. Harry had noticed that Malfoy was getting along better with his housemates since their conversation in the Trophy Room. Good, thought Harry. Better for his

cover; if he *was* planning to put his father in Azkaban, which Harry still doubted from time to time.

He had had a good day. He had made Draco Malfoy panic because he thought he was hanging upside down in the air, and he still had his perfect record. Harry noticed Snape giving him a strange look as he left the Great Hall. Did he know the Hara Kiri curse? Was he wondering why Harry had not screamed in agony?

Harry remembered dueling with him in the dungeon; he had looked at Harry with respect then. He could not make out the older man's expression now, but it almost seemed tinged with fear, as though he thought Harry was not quite human. But then Harry remembered his Animagus training and smiled to himself as he climbed the marble steps; well, part human and part golden griffin....

* * * * *

Shining tile was everywhere; in some places it shone more than others; there was some dirt and grime here and there, and a great many advertisements, it seemed. West End shows, toothpaste, American films, vacations in France. The curving ceiling overhead gave a sheltering feeling, like an oblong womb, like a tiled birth canal.

The Underground.

On the tube station platform were several dozen people, some alone, some in pairs or larger groups. Mothers held the hands of small children, keeping them away from where the train would be in a few minutes. Students in dirty, artfully torn jeans listed to one side under the burden of rucksacks worn on one shoulder only. A cellist hugged her instrument case to her, a precious thing, her life. Elderly matrons in babushkas held their handbags tightly, prepared to give pickpockets and purse-snatchers a hard time of it. Men who worked in the City, Financial Times under their arms, carried their umbrellas casually, yet prepared to make them weapons if necessary.

They had no weapons to defend themselves against what was to come.

They all clutched the people around them and the objects they carried as though that would protect them, as though that made them safe. They all had a common purpose; getting the train. Each person had an individual mission after leaving the train; go home, make dinner, go to work, do homework, perform at the opera house, give the children their tea and baths and tuck them into bed. But the tube united them temporarily, gave them one goal and destiny, one purpose in life.

One fate.

The train emerged from the tunnel, sliding slowly into the station. He couldn't tell which station it was; there was a sign, but it seemed to be gibberish. He couldn't make it out. Then, he saw the face.

Red eyes. Nostrils like slits. Not a human face. Not any more.

And then the world shattered into a million pieces....

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Two Cho's Mistake

Harry cried out, then clamped his hand over his mouth. He bit into the back of his hand to stifle his cry, drawing blood. His scar had never hurt so badly. He tried doing the pain management, the floating...but it was no good. This was real, physical pain. When it was just a spell, just the illusion of pain, he could remind himself that it wasn't real, that no one was actually, physically hurting him. But this kind of agony was no illusion. There was no blocking it, no way to escape it. He thought his head would explode...

He had skipped dinner, because he had felt so exhausted, climbing up the stairs after the Dueling Club. He had started up the stairs all right. He had thrown off a lot of pain during the duels, especially when he was up against Malfoy, but it caught up with him while he was climbing the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. Suddenly, not remembering how, he collapsed. Alicia and Hermione were bending over him, shaking him. Had he blacked out?

Then Ron had taken Alicia's place, catching up with them, and, leaning on Ron and Hermione, he had managed to get back up to the tower. They took him up to the fifth-year dorm. Harry remembered very little. They put him in bed, closing the curtains around him. He vaguely remembered that Neville had been in the room, reading on his bed.

He took his hand out of his mouth; the shape of his teeth showed in a bloody imprint on the soft flesh between his thumb and index finger on his right hand. And now he realized that that hurt like hell, too. But the scar was still worse. He closed his eyes, panting, growling low in his throat. Maybe he could transform into the golden griffin until the pain went away, he thought. He didn't have to worry about Sandy; he wasn't wearing her. He'd left her by the fire in the common room during the dueling, not wanting to risk her getting hurt (and not wanting Ron and Hermione to accuse him of cheating). As a griffin, I don't have a scar, he thought. And the pain of the transfiguration was nothing compared to this.

He pulled back the covers, crouching on the mattress, willing his bones, his skin, his hair and eyes to metamorphosize into the golden griffin. He felt the change come over him, felt the pads of his paws on the blanket, a mane tickling his back and face, his tail swishing back and forth. He felt the usual pain too, but he welcomed it, it receded in importance, became a kind of background noise. The scar torment became a thing of memory. He hunkered down on the bed, his front paws kneading the blankets instinctively. He put his chin on his paws, closing his eyes. Maybe he could actually sleep like this, find some respite from the pain.

He was starting to drift off, enjoying the feeling of his own purring motor resonating throughout his body, lulling his brain to sleep. Then he was aware of a step on the stone floor, and suddenly he heard his bedcurtains pulled aside. He opened his eyes to see Neville standing at his bedside, framed by the red hangings.

He had forgotten about Neville, whose mouth was open in shock. Then Neville's brain connected to his mouth. "Aaaaaah!" Neville screamed. Harry immediately returned to his human form and clamped his hand over Neville's mouth, making him produce a strangled sound. Neville's eyes were very large; Harry slowly removed his hand from his mouth and Neville swallowed and tried to speak.

“You--you’re--you’re--”

“Sssssh!” Harry hissed at him. He whispered, “Don’t say anything! McGonagall’s been training me in private. No one’s supposed to know yet.”

Neville nodded, his eyes as wide as ever, his mouth still open. Suddenly, the curtains on Harry’s right were swept open. Ron stood there, looking concerned. Harry turned to him, then looked back at Neville, pleading silently for him to keep his secret. Neville gave a very small nod, but Harry never really seriously thought that Neville wouldn’t keep his word; somehow he knew he could trust him completely.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Ron wanted to know, his breathing irregular. “Is it your scar again?”

Harry nodded, his hand on his head, even though the pain was duller, less piercing. He checked his watch; it was only six-thirty in the evening. Ron must have skipped dinner, stayed in the dorm to be near him. Harry ached inside, thinking of what a good friend Ron was, how little he deserved him. Even now, he was still keeping the Animagus training from him, and *Neville* knew. In fact, he realized, Neville was the first person apart from McGonagall and Dumbledore who had seen his transfigured form. Even Ginny, who had guessed what he was up to, hadn’t actually seen him change, and still thought he was planning to be a lion. Of course, Neville probably thought he was a lion too, he realized.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, fumbling on the bedside table for his glasses. Ron sat next to him, still looking very concerned. Then Harry heard a small squeak, and Ron said, “Okay, sweetheart, you want to come out?” and took Argent from the inside of his shirt, where she had been nestled. She was still quite small, although weaned from Bainbridge now, and Ron had been in the habit of letting the kitten ride around inside his shirt when he could; sometimes Harry had heard her mewing in class, while Ron sat, wide-eyed with innocence, and the professors paced around the room, looking for the source of the noise.

He held the small kitten in his hands now. She rubbed the side of her face against his palm, purring loudly, and Harry smiled, watching her. It was impossible not to smile at a kitten, especially this kitten. Harry watched Ron’s face as he watched her too; his expression softened whenever he looked at her, clearly showing how he had fallen for this little ball of fluff.

Harry had been surprised by Ron’s relationship with Argent. Thus far, Harry’s experience of Ron and pets had been Scabbers, Errol and Pig. Scabbers, of course, wasn’t really a rat but the dark wizard Wormtail. Still, Ron had spent quite a lot of time insulting him and complaining about him (although he’d been livid when he thought Hermione’s cat Crookshanks had eaten him). Scabbers was also yet another hand-me-down, something which reminded Ron of his family’s poverty (the rat used to be Percy’s). Errol wasn’t really Ron’s owl, but he had been allowed to use him; being quite elderly, Errol was winded by even the shortest flight carrying the smallest piece of mail. Pigwidgeon, on the other hand, had enthusiasm to spare, but Ron was constantly frustrated by his manic behavior and the fact that his diminutive size prohibited him

from carrying large packages as much as Errol's advanced years did.

Now here he was, almost constantly carrying around this tiny creature who was so attached to him, cooing to her the corniest endearments and letting her climb all over him. Harry had seen that Ron had claw marks all over his arms and legs and chest and shoulders when Ron was changing his clothes. When Argent climbed up his robes and her claws went too deep, he merely winced, waiting for her to reach his shoulder, and she would rub against the side of his face and purr in his ear.

After what seemed like a long silence between them, punctuated by Argent's squeaks and mews, Ron said, "Hermione should be back from dinner. Do you want to tell us both what made your scar hurt?"

Harry nodded, swallowing, still watching the kitten. If only my life could be that uncomplicated, he thought. Eat, sleep, wash, purr and look at someone with big eyes so that they'll pet me.

He struggled to stand, and when he seemed about to fall backward onto the bed again, Ron reached out his hand to steady him. Argent sat on his shoulder, claws sunk into his robes, but Ron didn't seem to mind. They walked down to the common room, Harry leaning heavily on the railing. They found Ginny and Hermione sitting in armchairs by the fire, talking excitedly about the dueling, but they stopped when they saw Ron and Harry. Both girls stood, alarmed at the sight of him.

"Harry!" Hermione said first. "What are you doing out of bed? You're pale as a ghost!"

"Go back to bed, Harry," Ginny said, putting her hand on his arm, then on his cheek. "You don't look well." Then she moved her hand to his forehead, as if checking for a fever, but when she made contact with the scar, he cried out, closing his eyes and knocking her arm away.

"Ow--" she started to moan, then stifled this when she saw the looks on Ron's and Hermione's faces. Hermione looked very, very grim.

"Harry--it's your scar, isn't it?" Hermione said softly.

He opened his eyes, looking at her dully, nodded. Then he turned to Ginny, who was still holding her arm. "Sorry, Ginny," he mumbled. She shrugged, letting go of her arm reluctantly, as though she were only trying to make him think she wasn't hurt.

He staggered to one of the empty armchairs by the fire, sat down heavily. He started speaking in a low voice as the others moved to sit in the other chairs.

"Voldemort is going after Muggles now. I saw him. It was a tube station. It--blew up..." he hit the arm of the chair repeatedly, frowning, his eyes squeezed shut. Suddenly his eyes flew open. He remembered. He knew.

“It was Westminster.”

“Westminster!” Hermione squealed. Ron and Ginny looked at her strangely; they didn’t know why this was significant. “Westminster,” she said again, softly. “That’s right near Parliament, and Westminster Abbey. And from Parliament Square, you can walk along Whitehall to Trafalgar Square...”

But Harry was remembering something else. Something to do with his name...why couldn’t he remember?

“Oh, Harry, do you think he was targeting Parliament?”

He shook his head, looking at the fire. “I have no idea. I saw--all of these people on the platform, waiting. Mothers with--with children...old people...” he swallowed; his throat felt very tight.

“Harry,” Ginny said softly, “Is there any chance that it--that it *was* just a dream? That it didn’t really happen?”

Harry shook his head again. “I wish. But whenever my scar hurts like that--”

“You have to go to Dumbledore,” Hermione jumped in. He looked up at Ron and Ginny, who both nodded agreement. He swallowed again, knowing they were right. He rose and went to the portrait hole, the others following him. He turned and put out his hands to stop them.

“I--I need to go alone. Wait here. Please.” They looked doubtfully at each other. “I’ll be fine. Really. The pain’s not so bad now. Please,” he said again. They nodded and let him go.

But as soon as he was in the corridor, he realized he didn’t want to go alone after all. He started to give the password to go back in, but he realized that he wasn’t interested in Ron or Hermione or Ginny coming along. He wanted to talk to someone else.

Without thinking, he started down the stairs. Down, down, down--until he was in the dungeons and knocking at Snape’s office door.

“Alohomora!” came the reply, causing the door to swing open suddenly. Harry stepped into the room cautiously. Snape was sitting at his desk, reading essays. There was a large pile of rolled pieces of parchment on the desk; he would probably be working quite late. He could have had all of that done already if he hadn’t accepted responsibility for the Dueling Club, Harry realized.

Perhaps Snape realized that too. He looked up at Harry, irritated, snarling, “What is it, Potter? Can’t wait until tomorrow for the Club standings? Well, you’re still ranked first, the only one still undefeated. Happy? Now, I have essays to grade. You may go.”

But Harry stood in the doorway still, holding onto the jamb for support.

“Potter? Are you all right?” Snape tried to sound surly still, but he didn’t completely succeed.

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t--didn’t come for the standings. The dueling exhausted me, especially throwing off the pain. The Hara Kiri--”

Snape frowned. “Yes. Technically, that’s not illegal in this country, but if it looked as though you couldn’t handle it, I’d have aborted the duel and suspended Mr. Malfoy from the club.”

“Don’t do that,” Harry said feebly, feeling weaker and weaker. Snape actually looked concerned, trying to hide it beneath a sneer.

“Come, Potter,” he said briskly, getting up and guiding him to the wing chair by the fire. “That’s what chairs are *for*,” he added, still trying to maintain a churlish demeanor, but the edge was gone from his voice.

Harry sank into the chair gratefully. Snape sat at his desk again. Harry looked around the office. He’d never really looked around when he’d come in to use the Pensieve or when he’d been hiding under his Invisibility Cloak. In addition to the shelves and shelves of carefully labeled potions ingredients, there were dozens of potions texts lining the walls as well; many did not appear to be in English, or even written with Roman letters. On the spines of a few texts he recognized Greek letters, Cyrillic, something that could be Chinese or Japanese, and others that he assumed were ancient runes, simply because he did not recognize them. A broom stood in the corner behind Snape; it looked old and slow. Then Harry realized that Snape’s robes were rather frayed at the edges, the tips of his shoes showing beneath his black robes looked scuffed and muddy.

There were no photos of family members waving at him, no friends or former students who had sent signed pictures with their best regards and thanks--not even Slytherins. It was the office of a lonely man. An alone man.

“I don’t know if Sirius told you about my dream. On Christmas night,” Harry said suddenly. Snape looked at him impassively.

“Yes.” His face betrayed no emotion.

“Well,” Harry went on, “I saw--I saw you. Looking like Lucius Malfoy. I saw you pulling Karkaroff and Draco Malfoy away from the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Then, when he did the killing curse, I didn’t know--I didn’t know who had died...”

Harry tried to keep his voice even, but it was difficult. He wanted him to know he was glad it was Karkaroff, but that didn’t seem right. He wanted to say he was glad it wasn’t Snape, but he couldn’t get the words out, somehow.

“Karkaroff was stupid. And a coward,” Snape said bitterly. “But he didn’t deserve to die. Not

like that.”

Harry nodded. No one deserved to die like that. He thought of Cedric. He thought of Snape, holding his mother, crying, her green eyes staring into the night sky which had had its constellations augmented by the Dark Mark...

“I had another dream,” he said abruptly.

“The Dark Lord?” Snape said apprehensively. Harry nodded. “Where?”

“In London. The Westminster tube station. Near Parliament. It was--it was full of people going home for the evening. It blew up.” Harry’s voice caught. “There were little kids...”

Snape interrupted him. “Enough.” He stood and went to the mantel. He picked some powder out of a ceramic bowl next to what looked like a pickled toad in a jar, and, throwing the powder into the fire, he said, “Remus Lupin.”

The flames turned green, then a moment later, Sirius’ head appeared to be nestled in among the coals in the firebox.

“Hello, Severus. Oh, hello, Harry. Didn’t expect to see you. And if you’d called at this time tomorrow, you wouldn’t have gotten me. Or Remus, of course. Full moon, next three nights. Remus is at work right now. Why did you call?”

Snape nodded grimly at Harry. He turned to the flames.

“I had another dream.” Sirius looked very frightened.

“Tell me about it.”

So Harry described it; the people in the station, the train coming in, seeing Voldemort’s face, the explosion, and waking up with his scar hurting.

“Sirius,” Snape said when Harry was done. “Didn’t I see one of those Muggle contraptions when I was there, one of those--tellies? Can you get any information from it? Or from the wireless?”

“I’ll try both the television and the radio. Can I call you back?” Snape nodded. Sirius’ face disappeared from the flames and they returned to their normal red-orange-yellow glow.

Harry turned to Snape, confused. “They have electricity there?” Snape looked at Harry as if he were hopelessly naive.

“There’s no work for Remus Lupin in the wizarding world, any more than there is for Sirius Black. Remus lives in a flat in Manchester, works as a night watchman in a warehouse. On

nights with a full moon, if he has to work he locks himself into the warehouse. If Sirius is around, he goes with him, stays with him in dog form. His employers also gave him a gun, for the guard job. When the moon is full, Sirius puts bullets into the gun that he made special--bullets made of silver. Remus has made him promise that if it looks like he could possibly get out or hurt someone in any way, he will use the gun."

It took Harry a moment to register the fact that Snape and Sirius and Lupin all seemed to be on a first-name basis, finally. Then he realized what Lupin had asked Sirius to do. "He wants Sirius to shoot him?" Harry whispered.

"Silver is the only thing that can kill a werewolf, Potter," Snape said matter-of-factly. Harry nodded, looking down at his hands, trying to imagine his best friend asking him to do the same. If Ron asked him to kill him, could he ever do it? Dueling was one thing, but this--

The time seemed to drag, but Harry checked his watch and saw that it was only five minutes since Sirius' head had disappeared from the fireplace. Suddenly, he was back.

"Severus, Harry, I have bad news," he began. "The tube station--Westminster--it's very bad. They're going to be getting bodies out all night. It's on every channel, and it's the only story on the radio. Even music stations have stopped playing music and are just reporting this. So far they've removed twenty-two bodies and gotten nine people out who survived--but they're all very iffy. All critical, being rushed to hospital by helicopter. The P.M. has evacuated the houses of Parliament; it's Sunday night, but here are always some government drones slogging away in an office somewhere. Scotland Yard's on site--they won't find anything, of course. I could probably Apparate right down into the tunnel, see what it looks like, but I don't dare with all the Muggle police around. My picture's still hanging up in police stations around the country. Luckily, that actually makes me a typical resident here in Remus' neighborhood..."

"How do we tell the Ministry of Magic that it was Voldemort?" Harry wanted to know.

"We don't. Fudge doesn't want to admit he was wrong about his return. We go with the media. I have a contact who can make sure the Voldemort connection gets into the Daily Prophet without your name being mentioned, Harry. The last thing we need is for Voldemort to find out about your dreams."

Damn! thought Harry. Draco Malfoy knows about the dreams. And I still don't really know what side he's on...

"Oh, and Severus," Sirius went on. "That operative has the samples. You'll be receiving them tomorrow. How long before you can run the test?"

"It will take about thirty-six hours," Snape replied.

Harry frowned. "What test?"

“Well, Harry, you suggested that we need to find out about Krum,” Sirius said.

“But,” Harry said, confused, “I thought you said you were going to get the samples.”

“I couldn’t possibly, Harry. The Krums all know what I look like as a dog, from last summer.” That means Viktor Krum knows, Harry realized. More possible trouble. “It needed to be someone else.” Harry was going to say, But you mentioned being an unregistered Animagus-- when he suddenly thought he knew how the samples had been obtained. *If you don’t mind answering to an obsolete dingbat...* Suddenly, he also knew who the contact at the Prophet was...

“At any rate, I’ll send you all the Muggle papers I can get my hands on concerning the attack. The gits on Fleet Street are going to be wetting themselves--oh, pardon me, Harry--”

Harry grimaced. “I’m fifteen, Sirius, not five.”

Sirius smiled at him. “Right. I got that point the last time I saw you...Well. I’m off to monitor the news reports some more. I wish Remus had something better than a nine-inch black and white-- and I’ll go to the corner news agency first thing in the morning. I’ll send the papers using Remus’ owl. He’s pretty hardy, can take quite a load. Have you told Dumbledore yet?”

Snape stepped in. “I’ll tell the headmaster. Harry needs to get some rest; we had Dueling Club this afternoon.”

Sirius smiled at Harry. “So! How’d you do?”

Snape answered before he could get his mouth open. “After three weeks and fifteen duels, he’s got fifteen wins. Only one who’s undefeated.” His voice was flat and emotionless. Harry looked at him, perplexed. “Harry threw off quite a lot of pain. Draco Malfoy used the Hara Kiri on him. He’s exhausted.”

Sirius drew in his breath. “Hara Kiri? And you just--threw it off?”

This time Snape let him answer. “Yeah. Only afterward, I felt like--like I could barely walk.”

“Well, you do as Severus says and get some rest. It sounds like he can talk to Dumbledore. I can give him a call, too, before I go back to monitoring the media. Take care of yourself, Harry. Are you going up to Dumbledore’s now, Severus?” Snape answered in the affirmative. “All right. I’ll give you a chance to get up there, then call in a few minutes. Good night, Harry.”

“Good night,” he said to his godfather. And he was gone. Suddenly, Harry realized something very odd had happened; when Snape had been talking to Sirius, he had referred to him as “Harry.” Twice. It was almost as strange as hearing Malfoy say his first name.

Then he thought about Sirius’ reaction to his throwing off the Hara Kiri curse, and also Snape’s

reaction, and Malfoy's. Why was he able to do it? Why was he able to almost completely overcome the Imperius Curse the first time Crouch had put it on him the previous year?

"Why was I able to do that?" he suddenly said aloud, unable to stop his thoughts from coming out of his mouth. He looked up at Snape. "I mean--can you ask the headmaster for me? I--I don't understand. Is it the same as being a Parselmouth? Is it something I got from Voldemort when he tried to kill me? It was like, once Moody told us we could do it, if our minds were strong enough--I knew I could do it. Last year, when I was in that graveyard..." but he couldn't continue for a moment, remembering some of the more gruesome details of that day. "I mean--Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on me twice, and it was--" He shook his head. "I couldn't breath properly afterward, it hurt so much. But just knowing now that I can stop some kinds of pain, somehow--I did it."

Snape looked at him blankly. A silence hung between them as Harry looked desperately back at him. Finally, Snape said softly, "I don't know, Potter. I can ask the headmaster."

He was Potter again. He would say Harry's first name when referring to him in the third person, but not when addressing him...Harry nodded and followed Snape out into the dungeon, looking briefly over his shoulder at the pile of parchment rolls still on Snape's desk; he'd be up until all hours finishing that now.

They walked together up to the entrance hall, silently. From here, Snape went up another staircase, away from the marble stairs to Gryffindor Tower, without a backward glance or another word to Harry. Harry had never gone that way to Dumbledore's office before. Perhaps Snape knew a shortcut.

But suddenly, Harry felt faint again. He leaned against the stone wall, watching the small black dots before his eyes grow larger and larger, blending into each other, one swallowing its neighbor swallowing its other neighbor, watching them begin to dance in whirling patterns, watching them expand until they blotted out the wavering torchlight...

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"Aaahhhh!" Harry screamed. He was shivering and soaking wet. Near-freezing water ran in rivulets down his cheeks from his hair, his robes were acting as conduits for streams of water which were now flowing into his shoes. His glasses were covered with drops of water, blurring his vision, and he had inhaled some water as well, making him sputter and choke as he lay on the cold stone floor of the entrance hall.

"Wheeeeeee!" Peeves cackled with glee as he flew about the hall, now rightside-up, now upside-down, now twirling in a spiral and going in a circuit around the hall at the same time. Harry looked up at him, still coming around, finding himself thinking, oddly, That would be a good trick on a broom...

Then he struggled to his feet; the cold water squelched in his shoes as he walked. He looked around, then took his glasses off, touched them with his wand, saying, "Impervious." His glasses now free of water, he put them on, looking around the entrance hall, feeling strangely alert. Peeves might have done him a favor; the impromptu cold shower seemed to have been just the thing to wake him up. Then suddenly, his stomach growled as it hadn't since the time between Dudley starting his diet after Harry finished third year and the arrival of his birthday cakes from his friends and Mrs. Weasley. A feral, animal sound generated from deep within him. A wild sound...

He smiled up at Peeves, who was still showing off his aerobic abilities. "Thanks, Peeves. That was just what I needed, I think." He turned to go up the marble steps that would eventually lead him to Gryffindor Tower (squelch!squelch!), then decided that what he really needed to do was go down to the kitchens for a bite.

But Peeves was appalled by being thanked for his prank. "Thanks! I drop ten water balloons on you and all you can say is THANKS? Whatever happened to, 'Sod off, Peeves?' Whatever happened to name calling? No 'git,' no 'prat,' not even a 'get away from me?'"

But Harry only smiled at him, pushing his damp hair off his forehead, going through the door leading to the stairs down to the kitchens. Behind him, Peeves was still suffering from his attack of poltergeist-inadequacy.

"WHAT ABOUT A 'GO TO HELL, PEEVES?'"

Harry turned to him briefly before closing the door. "Well, if you could, you'd hardly be here, would you?" he said calmly.

He closed the door behind him, smiling as he heard Peeves lose it further. His scream of "Aaaaaaargh!" was probably heard all over the castle, and would undoubtedly result in someone else--someone he could more effectively needle--being tortured by Peeves in the not-so-distant future.

Harry descended the stairs, then found the still-life of fruit. After tickling the pear to get it to turn into a door handle, he opened the door to the kitchens, his stomach moving within him with hunger as soon as the delicious smells wafted into his nose and from there into the part of his brain responsible for telling him to eat. *Food*. Never had he felt so hungry, somehow. Never had he wanted food so badly...

The after-dinner clean-up was in full swing. Elves were putting scouring charms on pots and pans and reshelving washed dishes and goblets by flying them around the tall room. Harry spotted Dobby and an elf that looked almost like Winky, but not quite; she also had large brown eyes and was wearing clothes, but she actually looked happy about this. She wore what appeared to be a dress meant for a large doll or a small baby. It was pink, with a floppy white collar and a little yellow duck embroidered over the chest. Smaller yellow ducks marched around the hem of the garment, which came below her knees, so that it threatened to look like a

miniature ball gown. On her head, however, she wore an incongruous ski cap with holes cut for her ears. It was patterned in green, orange, purple and red. She wore mismatched socks, as Dobby always did, one a grey, red and black argyle pattern, the other a brown and tan herringbone.

Dobby's face almost split in two, his grin was so wide when he saw Harry. "Harry Potter! You are coming to visit me!" he crowed in his squeaky voice, bouncing around Harry excitedly. Harry smiled at him. "Harry Potter, you must meet someone! This is Biddy!"

Biddy smiled nervously and gave a little curtsy. "Hello, Biddy," Harry said. "So, you decided to ask for clothes on New Year's Day. That's great!"

Biddy looked down and away, smiling but looking like she was trying not to. Was she blushing? Harry wondered. He couldn't tell. Dobby stood beside her and put his hand on her arm. "Biddy isn't being sure about clothes, not at first. But we is--we is going to be getting married and starting a family...and I is telling Biddy that I only wants to be with another free elf!"

Harry's mouth dropped open. "Dobby! That's great! Congratulations. But--you can't be marrying all of the elves who asked for clothes. How did you convince the others?"

"Oh, they is thinking about it for a long time. They is like me, but they is not wanting to say. The other elves..." Well, thought Harry. Dobby didn't need to tell him what the other elves were like.

"Dobby, do you think I could get something to eat? I missed dinner and I'm starving." Before he knew what was happening, Harry had been seated and about fifteen house elves had brought him six kinds of meat (three kinds of beef alone), four vegetables, three loaves of bread, and several goblets of pumpkin juice. Harry laughed, shaking his head. He reached for some bread and began to cut himself a slice. "Can you sit down with me, Dobby?" Harry asked, wanting to be polite.

"Wait; there is someone who is wanting to meet you, Harry Potter."

Dobby disappeared with a pop, and Biddy went back to work, looking slightly embarrassed when Harry looked at her, so he stopped doing that (although he was fascinated to see the elf who was going to be Dobby's wife) and just concentrated on working out what food he was going to eat next. He had a little of everything, it seemed, eating as though he wouldn't again for years...

When he felt he couldn't hold one crumb more, Dobby reappeared, and five other elves popped in with him. Dobby introduced them to him as Blat, Tiggy, Pinny, Quiff and Zenana. They were all wearing an interesting variety of clothes (or at least, things made of fabric that they were using as clothes, such as Dobby's tea-cozy hat; Harry thought Tiggy's skirt looked like it was made of a lampshade covered with several antimacassars). After the introductions were done, the elves dispersed to continue cleaning. Harry turned to Dobby and said, "Where are the

others? I thought you said there were nine.” Even including Bidy, there were only six elves besides Dobby wearing clothes.

Dobby looked somewhat embarrassed. “I is sorry, Harry Potter. Three is changing their minds. But seven free elves at Hogwarts is better than none!” he exclaimed, smiling again. Harry was glad Hermione wasn’t present.

“I suppose you’re right, Dobby. They’re very lucky to have you, you know. You can show them the ropes, take them where you go on your day off. Show them around Hogsmeade.”

Dobby looked embarrassed again. “Well, Harry Potter, I isn’t really able to do that, because--I is never taking a day off. Boxing Day is my first day off ever...”

“Dobby!” Harry said, trying to sound stern, but not doing very well. “Dumbledore gave you a day off a month. You should take it! What kind of example are you setting for the others?” Dobby grimaced, looking down and scuffing his foot on the floor. Harry sighed. “All right. The next Hogsmeade weekend is February tenth. Come into the village with me and my friends. We’ll show you round. Promise? You’ll make sure Bidy and the others come too?”

Dobby smiled gratefully at Harry, as though he were saving him from himself. “I promise, Harry Potter. I promise! I is going to tell the others we is going to Hogsmeade with Harry Potter!” And he popped out of the kitchen, making Harry smile and shake his head again.

* * * * *

Harry was feeling rather better after eating, but he still decided to skip the prefects’ meeting. He didn’t imagine that Roger or the other Ravenclaws would be especially civil to him after what happened during the Dueling Club. He told Ron about what Sirius had said about the news reports and sending the papers, asking him to inform Hermione when she returned from the meeting. He went back to bed, taking Sandy with him, and fell into a deep, deep sleep, and if he had dreams, he didn’t remember them--which was how he preferred it.

He rose as usual to run the next morning, meeting Hermione in the common room to stretch. They didn’t talk; Hermione was sneaking concerned looks at him while she stretched, but he pretended not to notice. When they reached the entrance hall, they saw the new club standings posted there, posted next to the Quidditch standings. So far, Gryffindor was ahead slightly with three-hundred and ten points, while Slytherin had defeated Hufflepuff by a score of two-hundred and ninety to forty. Ravenclaw had also beaten Hufflepuff earlier in the fall, by two-hundred ten to fifty. Harry wasn’t even sure he cared about Quidditch anymore. He scanned down the dueling standings lackadaisically.

Rank: 1 / Wins: 15 : Potter

Rank: 2 / Wins: 14 : (Tie) Granger, V. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 13 : (Tie) Spinnet, Malfoy

Rank: 4 / Wins: 10 : Davies

Rank: 5 / Wins: 8 (Tie): Johnson, L. Quirke, R. Weasley

Rank: 6 / Wins: 7 (Tie): Crabbe, Goyle, N. Quirke, G. Weasley

Rank: 7 / Wins: 5 (Tie): Finch-Fletchley, Bulstrode

Rank: 8 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Abbott, MacMillan

Rank: 9 / Wins: 2 : Chang

Rank: 10 / Wins: 1 : Creevey

Rank: 11 / Wins: 0 : Brocklehurst

Harry gave it a disinterested glance; it didn't seem to matter any more. Voldemort was going into London, killing people randomly, not just going after former Death Eaters like Karkaroff. No one was safe any more. No place was safe, with the possible exception of Hogwarts.

Hermione also looked at the standings, frowning. "Let's see," she said softly, in that voice she got when she was thinking aloud, working out an Arithmancy problem. "The only one I haven't beaten is you, and the only one Ginny hasn't beaten is me, and both you and Ginny beat Malfoy..."

"Hermione, can you obsess over this later? I'll just start running without you..." She tore herself away from the parchment, looking embarrassed. "It's just--"

"--that you're used to getting full marks? Not used to being number two?"

She bowed her head, her lips in a line, but the edges of her mouth smiling slightly. "At least the one I'm number two to is you. If it were Malfoy..."

He smiled. "You get to duel him next time. You can get him back for all those names he's called you..."

She looked thoughtful. "You know, it's not that I mind 'Mudblood.' I mean, since I grew up in the Muggle world, it just doesn't carry the meaning for me it does for people like Ron and Ginny. It's just the *way* Malfoy says it, the way he makes it sound like I eat out of a toilet or something..."

"Hermione!" Harry made a face.

“Oh, you know what I mean. Think of the most disgusting thing you can, and fill in the blank. That’s what he’s saying when he insults me. It’s his tone, not the word that gets to me...”

Harry looked at her; Malfoy was actually hurting her when he said those things, he realized. She was able to be strong enough to cover, but it had really cut deep. Usually it was Ron who leapt into the breach when these things occurred, attacking Malfoy in her defense. Harry had thought it was because Ron was more sensitive to the slur “Mudblood” than he was. Why hadn’t Harry ever noticed that before? Ron had never, ever failed to defend Hermione when she was attacked. Had Hermione noticed? he wondered. Or did she think of those deeds as the actions of a loyal dog, her companion and defender, nothing more?

After they finished running and stretching again, they went up to shower and change. Malfoy wasn’t in the bath when Harry went. He must be getting up at the crack of dawn to bathe without anyone being able to see his arm, Harry thought. I hope he’s losing plenty of sleep.

When he and Ron and Hermione were seated at the Gryffindor table, eating breakfast, Harry heard a rush of wings overhead, and he looked up at the ceiling of the Great Hall. The sky today was like flat white muslin, a typical winter sky, now filled with brown and black and grey and tawny owls, banking and circling, looking for the individuals they were supposed to find, dropping parcels into laps, perching on students’ shoulders while they untied parchments from their legs.

A barn owl with russet wing tips dropped a large bundle of newspapers tied with twine into Harry’s lap; a smaller tawny owl brought Hermione her Daily Prophet subscription. She usually read the wizarding paper over breakfast in a careless fashion, glancing over the front page, skimming the inside pages for anything about developments in transfiguration or charms, giving Ginny the horoscope, letting Ron have the Quidditch page.

But today, she sat staring at the front page in disbelief, two deep lines between her brows from her frowning so severely. She and Ron were sitting across from Harry. Ron looked at her now. “What is it?” he wanted to know, yet sounding like he didn’t. He took the paper from her.

“Hermione--there’s nothing here about the Westminster tube station...”

“That’s just it!” she whispered. “There’s nothing there! Fudge must have quashed the story!”

“Well,” Harry said grimly. “He didn’t manage to get it quashed in the Muggle papers.” He held up the top paper in the stack Sirius had sent. The headline read, 43 DEAD, 19 WOUNDED IN ATTACK ON PARLIAMENT TUBE STATION. Ginny sat down next to him, taking the paper from him.

“Oh, Harry,” she breathed, starting to read the story. Harry passed papers to Hermione and Ron, then picked up another one himself. **TERRORIST ATTACK UNDERGROUND**, said a headline. **SCOTTISH SEPARATISTS CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY FOR WESTMINSTER**

BOMBING, said another. PALESTINIAN GROUP TAKES CREDIT FOR 46 KILLED IN TUBE STATION.

“Forty-six?” Ron said. “Thought it was forty-three.”

“Mine says forty-nine,” Hermione said. “And it’s supposed to be Pakistani religious extremists...”

“Afghans,” said Ginny, looking at a different paper.

Harry picked up another paper. “This one says both Catholic and Protestant terrorist groups from Northern Ireland are claiming they did it.”

Ginny pulled another paper from the stack. “Fifty-two dead and Scotland Yard is saying something about a Colombian drug cartel. What’s a cartel?”

“Like the Death Eaters. Gang of people who work for a drug-kingpin. They have a network for distributing the drugs.” Harry’s voice sounded like it didn’t belong to him. So many people dead, he thought. And all these sick fringe groups so anxious to pretend that they did it, the police pointing the finger at people they knew the public hated anyway, people who had probably done plenty of horrible things for which they’d never been punished.

Harry remembered witches and wizards talking in hushed voices about Voldemort’s previous reign of terror. He remembered that when Wormtail had framed Sirius for his own murder and had killed that street full of Muggles, the Ministry of Magic had come quickly to the spot, throwing around memory charms, whisking Sirius off to Azkaban without a trial.

But even then, it was only a dozen or so people killed, nothing like the numbers from the tube station. He thought of Moody saying that Muggles were far more dangerous than wizards, had killed far more people.

Voldemort had raised the stakes.

Suddenly, Sandy hissed under his robes, “A griffin will meet with a serpent.” Like in the Pensieve. Did she mean Gryffindor and Slytherin again? And if so, who did she mean?

“Oh, Harry,” Ginny said again. Harry looked at her. She looked even more horrified than she had before. “Look--” she handed him the paper she’d been reading. He followed her finger down the column.

“You read it,” Harry said, after he got a brief glimpse of what it said.

“The BBC,” read Ginny softly, “reported that when rescuers were finally able to enter the station proper, they found the word POTTER scrawled on the wall in an unknown green substance. Since the BBC has reported this, a number of groups heretofore unknown to the

police have claimed responsibility. Among them are Pagans of the True Earth Resurrected, People Obligated to Treat Everyone Rotten, and Proponents of Traditional Trades Expressing Rage.”

Ron laughed. “That’s rich! People Obligated to Treat Everyone Rotten...”

“It’s not funny!” Harry snapped at him. Ron’s face immediately fell; he looked like a four-year-old being scolded.

“Sorry, Harry,” he mumbled, his ears reddening.

On his other side, George finally looked up from his breakfast and saw the four of them with the newspapers spread out all over the place. “Are those Muggle papers? What do you want with them, then?”

Harry collected the papers again, trying to pile them into a reasonably neat stack. He didn’t answer George. He looked up at the head table; the four of them had been seated at the very end of their house table, closest to the professors. Snape was only a few yards away, drinking. He looked at Harry over his goblet and gave a very small nod, then rose and went through a door next to the one that led to the anteroom where Harry had Animagus training. Aha! he thought. Sandy was talking about him and Snape...

He asked Ron to bring his rucksack to Potions for him. He was staggering under the weight of the papers; Lupin must have a really strong owl, he thought. He met Hermione’s eye as he left; she looked very worried. Then he looked at Ginny, feeling rather worried himself; she was reading Hermione’s copy of the Prophet, chewing her toast. Did Draco Malfoy know anything about the Westminster attack? he wondered. Did Lucius Malfoy?

He went into the entrance hall and then down the stairs to the dungeons. When he entered the Potions classroom, he saw that Snape’s office door was already open and he was sitting at his desk. Did that door in the Great Hall lead to a secret passage to his office? Harry wondered. There must be a lot more secret passages than Mssrs. Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail and Prongs knew about when they made their map, he thought.

After he entered the office, Snape pointed his wand at the door and it slammed shut. Harry silently dropped the stack of newspapers on his desk. He pulled some off the top that he hadn’t seen, going to sit in the wing chair by the fire as he had the previous evening. They sat in silence, paging through article after article, the casualty reports getting worse and worse, the groups claiming responsibility more and more outlandish.

After reading yet another article about a group claiming that they had put the word POTTER on the station wall as their signature (Picts of the True Erse Republic--another Scottish group), he looked up at Snape, who was frowning fiercely at the mess of nonsensical stories. He didn’t know what Snape thought of Muggle newspapers before (probably not very much), but he certainly didn’t think this would raise his estimation of them.

“The largest death toll I’ve seen yet is from the Times,” Harry said quietly. “Forty-seven adults dead and twelve children; twenty-seven people still in hospital, about half likely to die in the next day or two.”

Snape nodded, putting aside the paper he’d been looking at, then drumming his long fingers on his desk, staring into space. Suddenly, the bell rang for the first class of the day, making Harry jump.

“Get out,” Snape said suddenly. But he didn’t say it in a rude way; Harry understood. He shouldn’t be seen in here, hanging out with Snape as though they were friends (were they friends?), especially by the Slytherins who would be coming down for class. He only had five minutes before the second bell would ring, officially beginning the class. Snape waved his wand at the mess of newsprint, and the papers all organized themselves into a neater stack than human hands could ever make and went flying into a cupboard behind his desk, closing and locking. Very neat, though Harry. He hurried out of Snape’s office and moved to the back of the class, sitting down at a table. He put his head on his arms sleepily, waiting for the other students to arrive.

He must have dozed off briefly, because he was very startled when he heard a familiar voice bellow, “Potter!”

He tried to open his eyes and raise his head, blinking. The classroom was full of the usual fifth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors. Ron was next to him; Harry remembered now that he’d been dreaming of walking down a Hogwarts corridor, and the wall of the corridor itself kept reaching out and poking him...that must have been Ron, trying to wake me up, he thought...

“If you’d like to join us, Potter, get out your dried bird’s-foot trefoil seed pods. Unless you’d like to try making your potion without them and poisoning yourself,” Snape sneered at him. The Slytherins laughed appreciatively. Harry grimaced and picked up his rucksack, taking out his Potions supplies and sighing. Back to normal. He chanced a look at Ron, who looked apologetic. When Snape had turned round, Harry shrugged at him. Hermione was sitting with Neville; he caught her eye and also shrugged. Then he saw Neville looking at him strangely. Suddenly Harry wondered, Should I have trusted Neville? Should I have put a memory charm on him instead? But he didn’t know how to work one; memory charms weren’t taught until the end of seventh year, so that students wouldn’t constantly be trying to make the professors think they hadn’t assigned things, or making them forget that they were going to be setting an exam on a particular day.

Harry moved through his classes in a trance again. He was grateful for Sandy, because many a time she warned him of something they were about to cover in class, and he was able to jolt himself back to the present in time to avoid looking like a total fool.

This was far worse than anticipating Dueling Club. This felt like walking through water constantly; pressing against the air as though it had weight and substance, as though he were in

the lake again, trying to get past the Grindylows and merpeople. Except that it wasn't just four people that were in danger, four people he was despairing of getting back to the surface. There were hundreds, thousands, millions of people out there in danger, potential targets. He felt like he was moving through an overwhelming sea of despair and worry, waiting to find out what Voldemort's next atrocity would be...

"...they found the word POTTER scrawled on the wall..."

* * * * *

Harry had some trouble blocking pain in Moody's class that afternoon. At first, he thought he was just distracted. But then he realized that, after Sunday night, somehow, he felt he deserved to suffer. He just couldn't bring himself to stop the pain. Finally, after Seamus had put a simple Passus Curse on his left ankle, leaving him gasping, he went to Madam Pomfrey for the first time since they'd started the new term, asking her for pain relief.

Then, on Tuesday morning, as he was about to go out the door to Hagrid's class, Sandy hissed to him, "A secret will be revealed." A moment later, Snape appeared, evidently having planned to waylay him at this time.

"Potter! A word."

The rest of the Gryffindors looked at him sympathetically, assuming he was probably in for a detention. The Slytherins, on the other hand, looked pretty pleased about this. Harry waved Ron and Hermione on through the door.

"I'll catch you up," he told them.

When the students from both houses were gone, Snape went down the stairs to the dungeons, not saying a word to Harry, who reckoned he should just follow. They passed by the open door of Snape's classroom, where Harry saw the first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins; Will Flitwick was sitting in the back row with Gillian Lockley, and in front of them he clearly saw Crabbe's younger sister Wilhelmina.

They didn't go into the classroom; about twenty feet farther on, Snape pulled back a tapestry and opened a door concealed there by whispering a password Harry couldn't hear. Snape held the door open for him and Harry went through. There were torches on the walls of the passage, and, immediately to the left, a set of steep, narrow stairs that could lead from the door in the Great Hall, Harry suspected. It wasn't a very long passage; in a moment, it seemed, Snape pushed on what looked like part of the wall, but it pivoted in the middle, leaving about two feet on either side to go through into Snape's office. Harry went through the opening on the left, seeing on that side some of the shelves in Snape's office that held potions texts.

Once in the office, Snape did not close the bookcase. "This won't take long, Potter," he told him tersely. "I've completed the tests on the samples." Harry swallowed, unsure whether he wanted to know.

"Is he--"

"No." Snape sat in his desk chair, shuffling through parchments on the desktop. "There is no doubt whatsoever that Krum is the product of his mother and father. He is not the Dark Lord's son." Ah, Harry thought. That was the secret.

Then he frowned; he'd been so sure! But then, who had Karkaroff been speaking of? Was it one of the other students who'd come for the tournament? Had Voldemort's heir been helping Barty Crouch, Jr., and Crouch hadn't even known? It seemed to Harry that if he had known, he would have said something about it when he was under the influence of the Veritaserum.

"You may go, Potter. Go back down the passage and take the stairs."

Harry nodded at him. He left, hearing Snape's words in his head again.

He is not the Dark Lord's son.

Well, that was a good thing, wasn't it? Harry slogged up the stairs, thinking furiously. The stairs made several turns, in different directions, and at the top was a large wooden door. Sure enough, when he opened it, he was back in the empty Great Hall. So, Snape had shown him a secret passage to his office (two, really, one from the Great Hall and one from the door under the tapestry, although he didn't know the password for that one).

After he closed the door to the secret stairs, Harry tried opening it again, expecting that he wouldn't be able to. But it worked just fine. On the other hand, even if someone stumbled onto this passage, they wouldn't know where to push on the pivoting wall that was also a bookcase unless they'd been shown. Otherwise, it just looked like a dead-end. (And the bookcase wasn't at the very end of the passage either; it was about half-way along. It wasn't at all obvious.) Harry thought about Snape showing him this. He must have decided he could trust him completely. But then, perhaps he had already decided that when he gave him the chance to go into the Pensieve...

During the rest of the week, Harry wondered about Voldemort's heir. Perhaps Karkaroff had been talking about Krum after all; Voldemort had said that he wasn't sure he was his heir. Karkaroff could have been mistaken. Maybe the Krums had told him he was Voldemort's heir to get Viktor preferential treatment at Durmstrang. It had certainly worked; Harry remembered the way Karkaroff had doted on him even before his name came out of the Goblet of Fire, how he was surly and short with the other students from his school. No, Harry was still convinced that Karkaroff had been speaking of Viktor Krum. It didn't matter that Karkaroff had been misled. And Voldemort had said he'd already been useful...that meant he still had to make sure Hermione got rid of him.

When the fourth meeting of the Dueling Club arrived, Harry was feeling like he was in good form again. He hadn't needn't to see Madam Pomfrey since Monday. Harry tried not to think about the newspapers he knew were sitting in the cupboard in Snape's office, about the name POTTER being scrawled on the wall of the tube station. It would do no good to think about that now. He had to prepare himself for what was to come. The O.W.L.s were one thing; being ready for Voldemort was quite another.

They would only be doing four duels each for the last meeting. Each round would have eight duels, and when all of the dueling was done, Snape would take some time to figure out the standings and they would all know who wasn't going to make the cut. Harry had to give Mandy Brocklehurst credit; she was terrible, she hadn't won a single duel, but she still went into the center of the circle every time with her head held high, ready to try again. She hadn't run out in tears, or insisted that others were cheating. When people beat her now, they were really very nice to her. It was pity, pure and simple, but she didn't seem to mind.

They began with Millicent Bulstrode defeating Hannah Abbott; Hannah probably wouldn't make the cut either, Harry thought. He wished Millicent weren't good enough, but she probably would be staying, unfortunately. After that, Crabbe and Malfoy bested Niamh and Liam Quirke, followed by Hermione doing her best to give Ernie MacMillan a chance, but he muffed it anyway. Then Mandy lost to Cho and Angelina tricked Ron. Snape called the next two names.

“Spinnet! Granger!”

Hermione was going again. Alicia looked at her with narrowed eyes. They were both very good; Alicia could definitely improve her standing if she could beat Hermione. Harry was the only one who had done it.

They bowed to each other and held their wands at the ready. Alicia quickly aimed the disarming charm at Hermione, who dodged it at the last moment, aiming her wand at Alicia's legs.

“Tarantella!” she cried, and Alicia's feet started to move unbidden, doing a wild tarantella, carrying her around the circle where she did not seem to want to go. Alicia tried to take careful aim at Hermione while she was yet dancing wildly. She put the jelly-legs jinx on Hermione, who collapsed on the floor, unable to stand. Alicia tried to disarm her, but Hermione rolled over quickly, dodging it yet again. She pointed at the dancing Alicia, saying, “Inverso!”

Alicia screamed, for now she had the sensation of dancing wildly while suspended upside down in the air. She continued to dance on the actual floor, however much she thought she was airborne, and narrowing her eyes, she aimed at Hermione again. She actually seemed to be overcoming the disorientation of the Inverso, and Hermione saw this. She couldn't stand up to take Alicia's wand from her, so she swiftly pointed her wand again, crying, “Expelliarmus!” just before Alicia started to say the same thing. But Hermione had done it first; Alicia's wand came hurtling through the air into her hand, and Snape broke the spells on both girls. Alicia shook her head, looking around, then reached out her hand to Hermione, helping her stand. They smiled at

each other; they seemed to have been really enjoying themselves. They were well matched.

In the second round, Goyle beat Cho. (Harry was beginning to suspect she wouldn't last, either--he'd never felt grateful to Goyle for anything before, but he was now.) Then Ginny defeated George (she seemed to anticipate everything he did). Then Crabbe and Niamh won over Hannah and Millicent. After that it was Hermione's turn again, and when Snape called her opponent's name, she got a look on her face that Harry could only describe as downright evil.

"Malfoy!"

Hermione and Malfoy stepped into the circle. After they bowed, Hermione began her onslaught. Malfoy never had a chance. She cried, "Rictusempra! Reverso! Inverso!" in quick succession, and soon Malfoy was giggling uncontrollably while thinking he was hanging upside-down in the air and also thinking that what was in front of him was behind him. He was so disoriented that he dropped his wand, closing his eyes and holding his head with both hands, looking miserable but laughing hysterically nonetheless. Hermione calmly picked up his wand and broke the spells on him herself, not bothering to wait for Snape.

Harry heard her say softly as she handed his wand back to him, "Remember what happened when you dueled with a Mudblood." She returned to her space between Harry and Ron, her face still stony, but also satisfied. Harry remembered again the day they had first kissed in the Charms classroom and she had controlled Peeves. He was glad someone so powerful was on his side.

The second round ended with Liam defeating Ron (who returned to the circle looking very grumpy), Ginny gently disarming Ernie, and Colin actually getting a win--but it was over Mandy, so that wasn't saying much. When the third round started, Roger handily beat Goyle, looking pretty smug about it, and Harry and Alicia easily defeated George (he'd been watching Ginny dueling him) and Ron (who looked grumpier and grumpier). After Niamh disarmed Hannah, they took a break. Ginny, Hermione and Alicia were chatting happily about their duels; Ron and George were grouching about dirty tricks (the other person winning seemed to be the "dirty trick" they disliked the most, from what Harry could tell). Harry was sort of drifting between the two groups, not saying much of anything.

After the break, Justin got a spectacular win over Millicent, making Liam grin broadly at him. Niamh even looked like she was warming to the idea of Justin and her brother. Colin managed to get another win as well, over Cho, pretty much cementing her departure, Harry felt. Then he beat Ernie, trying to be gentle; he didn't want to seem unsympathetic, but Ernie was really horrible, he thought. All the practicing during the Christmas break seemed to have gone right out of his head. (Although Harry suspected he actually spent a lot more time involved in a different physical activity during the holiday.) Finally, Goyle defeated Mandy, who now seemed to be rather bored with the whole process.

The fourth round started with Angelina besting George (Harry was starting to suspect George had a gender problem with his dueling) and ended with Harry besting Angelina. In between,

Crabbe and Alicia beat Justin and Liam, and Roger, Goyle and George defeated Mandy, Colin and Ernie. But the really tense duel of this round was between Ron and Draco Malfoy.

Harry figured afterward that Ron won for two reasons; first, he was just plain hacked off about losing a number of previous duels he seemed to think he should have won, and secondly-- Malfoy didn't seem to be trying to win. He wasn't interested in losing quickly, however, drawing it out, but several times Harry saw that he had an opening that he would have exploited with anyone else, and didn't take it. Why? he wondered. He also found himself wondering whether Ginny had been upset about the way he'd let her beat him. He hadn't had any compunctions about beating George, so why was he letting Ron off easy?

When Ron returned to the circle, looking much happier than he had before, Harry didn't dare hypothesize that Malfoy had thrown the duel. If there was a guaranteed way to upset Ron, that was it. Not that it took much sometimes, Harry reflected. Either Malfoy really was going to set his father up and wanted Ron to approve of him and Ginny, Harry thought, or he's lulling me into a false sense of security.

The fifth round seemed to go very quickly; after four weeks of dueling, many of the others looked quite exhausted, to Harry's eyes. Hannah and Millicent went down again, this time to Justin (more celebrating with Liam) and Crabbe. Then Malfoy defeated Alicia, using the Passus Curse on her mercilessly, on her arms and legs and finally her neck, until Harry thought Snape would put a stop to it. After her wand was returned to her, Alicia staggered out of the circle, and Hermione and Angelina let her lean against them. It had probably been the dirtiest duel since he had put the Hara Kiri on Harry. Hermione and Roger had no trouble coming out on top over Liam and Cho, and then Ginny and Niamh defeated Angelina and Justin. There was only one duel left, and Harry knew he was one of the people, because he'd only done three that day, but he couldn't remember for the life of him who he hadn't dueled. Snape called his name and he went into the circle. Then Snape called his opponent's name.

"V. Weasley!"

Harry swallowed as he watched her enter the circle. He had continued growing during the school year and his robes were starting to look a couple of inches too short. Ginny had continued growing, too, and they were now both about the same height. Her hair was pulled back in a messy knot at the back of her head and her brown eyes looked inscrutable and beautiful all at once.

NO, he told himself sternly. I will not let myself get distracted. Get it over with...

After they bowed, he heard her start to cry, "Expelli--"

"Impedimenta!" he shouted, quicker. As she slowed down almost to a complete stop, he plucked her wand away from her, then took the spell off. She looked at him, her face very close to his, it seemed. She gave him a very slight smile. Harry smiled back at her; she didn't hold it against her. For some reason, that was very important to him.

They took another break, and then Snape summoned them back into the hall; he was getting ready to post the standings. "Now!" he said loudly, but without seeming to shout. "Some of you have the same number of wins as another person, or more than one person, in some cases. If there is a tie, your standing is based upon how you performed against other people with the same number of wins."

They all looked like they were on tenterhooks. Snape swept past them and into the entrance hall, taking down the parchment with the old standings and magically attaching the new parchment to the wall.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Dueling Club Standings

Rank: 1 / Wins: 19 : Potter [Captain]

Rank: 2 / Wins: 18 : Granger

Rank: 3 / Wins: 17 : V. Weasley

Rank: 4 / Wins: 15 : Malfoy

Rank: 5 / Wins: 15 : Spinnet

Rank: 6 / Wins: 14 : Davies

Rank: 7 / Wins: 11 : Crabbe

Rank: 8 / Wins: 10 : R. Weasley

Rank: 9 / Wins: 10 : N. Quirke

Rank:10 / Wins: 10 : Goyle

Rank:11 / Wins: 10 : Johnson

Rank:12 / Wins: 8 : L. Quirke

Rank:13 / Wins: 8 : G. Weasley

Rank:14 / Wins: 7 : Finch-Fletchley

Rank:15 / Wins: 6 : Bulstrode

Rank:16 / Wins: 3 : Creevey

CUT:

Rank:17 / Wins: 3 : Abbot

Rank:18 / Wins: 3 : Chang

Rank:19 / Wins: 3 : MacMillan

Rank:20 / Wins: 0 : Brocklehurst

Those who were cut didn't seem terribly surprised. But Colin was positively beaming about still being in the club; he couldn't believe he'd made it.

"I'm still in the club, Harry! Did you see! I didn't get cut!"

Harry smiled at him. "Good going, Colin."

Ron didn't look all that happy, but he tried to be philosophical. "Well, at least I won more than half my duels. Ten out of nineteen isn't too bad..."

Only Roger Davies seemed really upset about his standing, and he was number six. "Does anyone else think it's strange," he spat angrily, "that four out of the top five are from Gryffindor?"

Snape fixed him with a glittering black eye. "Am I the house master for Gryffindor, Davies?" Roger couldn't meet Snape's gaze; he faltered.

"No, sir, I just noticed..."

"The Gryffindor students might be practicing together, I'll grant you that. But after all of the trials are done, you'll all be training together during club meetings. There will no longer be any 'house secrets,' if that's what you're worried about, Davies."

Roger swallowed and nodded, unable to speak. Good, thought Harry. There's something that can shut him up. Maybe there was some way Snape could come to prefects' meetings...

* * * * *

When the Dueling Club met for week five, they had four new members: Fred Weasley, Pansy Parkinson, Evan Davies and Lee Jordan. Harry thought that perhaps the Hufflepuffs had given up.

Harry only had to duel three times; it was going to be a short meeting, only thirty-five duels total,

to start to screen the new members, followed by another thirty-five the following week. He won all three duels, maintaining his top position. Hermione and Ginny only dueled twice each, also both maintaining their standings.

Harry was glad that he no longer had to see Cho in Dueling Club, but there was still one hurdle to be leapt: they had arranged to go to Hogsmeade with Viktor and Hermione on Saturday, since it was the Hogsmeade weekend closest to Valentine's Day. Harry for once wanted the week to go slowly, so of course, Saturday zoomed at him with the speed of a speeding train.

On Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione got up to run as usual. After showering, dressing and eating breakfast, he went over to the Ravenclaw table to get Cho for their Valentine's date to Hogsmeade. Hopefully the last such date ever. He and Cho met Hermione in the entrance hall.

"You two wait here. I'll go down to the kitchens to see if the elves are ready." He started to move toward the door to the kitchen stairs.

"Harry!" Hermione said. "What are you talking about?"

"The house elves--oh, did I, um, not mention that I invited them to come along? It's their day off, and they've never had one before, and I told them we could show them around Hogsmeade."

Hermione was trying not to grin too broadly. "Do you mean," she said a little too gleefully, "we're going to be showing ten elves around Hogsmeade?" Cho was looking rather upset.

"Well, actually, it's seven. Only six others besides Dobby finally asked for clothes. Don't be upset--please?"

But Cho was the one who was upset. "Harry! This is our Valentine's date! And you're--you're bringing house elves?" she sputtered in disbelief.

Hermione did in fact look disappointed about the number of elves, but she began to look merry again once she saw Cho's reaction. This is perfect, thought Harry happily. I didn't even think about how hacked off Cho would be when I invited Dobby and the other elves. Plus, Hermione's thrilled! He felt very fortunate indeed as he went down the stairs to the kitchens; before the door closed behind him he saw Cho glaring at Hermione.

When he returned with the elves, Hermione and Cho seemed to have reached a kind of detente. He took Cho's arm and they followed Hermione and the elves out the door.

While they walked to Hogsmeade, the house elves bounced around Hermione, talking to her about Boxing Day and playing in the snow. They didn't *know*; none of them had ever played before in their lives. Hermione was appalled.

“Not even when you were very young?”

“No,” Quiff told her squeakily. “House elves is working almost immediately, Miss.”

“Well,” Zenana broke in, “There is mostly eating and sleeping for a week first. Then we learns how to *pop!* And we is ready to be useful.”

“Wow,” Hermione breathed, clearly having no previous idea just how much the house elves lived lives of all work and no play.

When they reached Hogsmeade, they met Viktor Krum at Honeydukes. Viktor was less than pleased to see the elves.

“Herm-own-ninny? Vat are these--creatures that are coming vith you?”

“Don’t you have house elves in Bulgaria?” Harry asked him.

“Ve haff human servants. Squibs. But ve giff them magical items to help them do their vork. It is better than haffing to live like Muggles...”

Harry saw Hermione bristle. “I lived like a Muggle for eleven years, and my parents are Muggles, I might remind you.” The challenge in her voice was unmistakable. Viktor clearly heard it too.

“Herm-own-ninny,” he said, placatingly now.

Harry tried not to grin again; this had all the signs of a last date. Cho was upset, Viktor was walking on eggshells with Hermione. It was perfect. Harry’s cheeks were starting to hurt with the effort of not smiling constantly like a complete fool.

“They will not be welcome,” Sandy said suddenly, under his clothes. Viktor Krum, whipped his head around.

“Vat vas that?” he said, looking about nervously. Harry cursed to himself. Be quiet, Sandy. Stop hissing. He didn’t think about her prediction, he just wanted her to be quiet.

After walking through the village, showing the elves all of the points of interest, they went to the Three Broomsticks for lunch. But the moment they entered the pub, the room went silent. It was about two-thirds full with Hogwarts students, and otherwise populated by residents of or visitors to Hogsmeade, adult witches and wizards. Harry hadn’t heard so much silence and so many eyes on him since his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire.

Finally, the publican, Madam Rosmerta, came out from behind the bar and walked over to them. She glanced over her shoulder at her scandalized patrons.

“I’m afraid we don’t serve their kind in here,” she told them quietly, almost as though she were embarrassed, but not as though she were interested in having them change her mind. Hermione goggled at her.

“Don’t serve *their kind*?” she said, with that dangerous edge to her voice. Harry glanced around the room; the looks that the other patrons were giving them were less than friendly. Unfortunately, because Harry was looking around the room and Hermione was glaring at Madam Rosmerta, that meant no one was watching the elves.

With a *pop!* Quiff had appeared at the table of a handful of sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins, sampling some chips and sips of butterbeer without invitation. Zenana had decided to *pop!* behind the bar and help herself to some butterbeer directly from the tap. Dobby had a feeling that this wasn’t quite accepted behavior and was trying to get Bidy and Tiggy to stop swinging on the chandeliers, giggling hysterically while they did so. In the meantime, Blat had decided to amuse some of the bar patrons by putting hover charms on them and their drinks and food, which started to be flung about in a rather messy manner.

Rosmerta was livid. “You see! You see why they can’t come in here? Get them out! Now!”

But Hermione was still up for a fight. Harry used a summoning charm to whisk the elves across the room to him while she yelled at Madam Rosmerta, “They’ve never had a day off before! They don’t *know!* We’ll talk to them--they’ll behave--”

But it was as though she hadn’t said a word. Rosmerta was purple.

“Out! Out!” she screamed at Hermione. Harry swallowed and nodded at her; he was clutching the six newly-freed elves to him, like a bunch of balloons that had threatened to float away. Dobby was hopping nervously nearby. She turned and stomped out the door, Harry following her, but then she turned and thrust her face in the doorway again.

“You have officially lost all of our future business!”

“Good!” responded Madam Rosmerta with a satisfied flip of her head.

But as Harry was preparing to leave, clutching the wayward elves to him, he saw that Cho was looking at him in shock.

“Harry!” she exclaimed. “What about our date? Don’t tell me you’re leaving with those--those--”

Harry saw his opportunity and took it. “Yes. You can stay if you like. Hermione and the elves and I won’t stay where we’re not wanted.”

Now she started turning as purple as Madam Rosmerta. “If you leave now, Harry, we’re through.” She didn’t speak loudly, but loud enough. Everyone in the pub was watching. Harry

Potter was being dumped. He wondered if it would be in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow.

“Goodbye, Cho.”

Viktor was standing with his hand on her shoulder. Harry nodded at him, then turned and left. When the door closed behind him, he turned to Hermione, putting down the elves, a huge grin on his face.

She was in tears. “Can you believe that? The way she treated them? What she said, even before they started--you know--”

“Hermione,” he said to her softly, as the elves started playing in the snow again, as though oblivious to what had just happened. “One battle at a time. Viktor stayed inside--with Cho. And she told me we’re through.” He smiled broadly. “Our plan worked!”

She looked at the closed door of the pub, then started laughing. “And all we had to do was bring some house elves along on a date...” she began, but couldn’t go on for her laughter. Harry laughed now too, and they walked back to the castle with the elves, skipping through the snow and playing with them, happier than they remembered being for a long time. He knew that at some point, she would want to redress the way the elves had been treated at the Three Broomsticks, but it wasn’t time for that yet. But he knew he wanted to be beside her for that battle too.

He shouted as Quiff *popped!* into the space right behind him and put a large, wet, cold snowball down the back of his shirt. He ran after him, hysterical, and he and Hermione and the elves played in the snow for the rest of the afternoon.

* * * * *

That evening after dinner, he went to Animagus training as usual. Ginny had already left the Great Hall, so he gave Sandy to Hermione to take back upstairs for him. He didn’t have very far to go before his training would be complete. Of course, then he would have to think of a more permanent solution for Sandy...

McGonagall was very pleased that the pain didn’t bother him very much any more. Or maybe it was just that he had become accustomed to it. Maybe if you weren’t used to it, something as basic as the feeling of your blood flowing through your veins would be painful, he thought. It was all a matter of getting used to things, like the elves getting used to having days off, and people in the wizarding world getting used to elves in clothes.

He still needed to learn to fly. He hadn’t really used his wings yet. But there was still time for that. He went upstairs after training feeling rather pleased with himself, humming the lullaby his mother used to sing in an upbeat, jazzy way. When he entered the common room, Ron and Hermione immediately waved him over to the chairs by the fire. Ginny wasn’t there; probably in

the Potions dungeon, he thought. With Malfoy.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione asked anxiously.

“Yeah,” Ron chimed in. “What can’t you talk to us about right here?”

Harry made a face at them. “What are you on about?”

“The notes,” Hermione said, showing him a small piece of parchment which said, “Meet me in the Charms classroom at midnight. Can’t discuss it now. Harry.” The handwriting and signature looked for all the world like he had written it. Ron had one like it; but it had a couple of variations. It didn’t look identical, so it wasn’t magically reproduced, like the invitations to the Christmas party. It also looked handwritten by Harry. He looked up at them both after examining the parchments.

“I didn’t write these,” he said softly.

Hermione and Ron looked at each other and then him. “Then who did?” Ron asked.

It was starting. They were coming after Ron and Hermione directly, now. Harry didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to alarm them. He sat down, staring at the notes. “That’s not the most important thing. We can work that out later. The question is *why*?” Hermione and Ron sat down in nearby armchairs. “Whoever did it--do they want to get you *into* the Charms classroom, or do they want to get you *out* of Gryffindor Tower?”

Ron stared at him, frowning. Hermione also frowned, her eyes moving back and forth; Harry could tell she was thinking furiously.

“The trouble is,” Harry went on, “we have no way of knowing. I also have to wonder why the person that sent you the notes thought they could fool you into thinking I’m the one who sent them. I send all my mail by Hedwig.”

“It *was* Hedwig who brought them,” Ron told him. “After dinner, when you usually--disappear.”

“Oh. Hmm...Well, if I had wanted you two to meet me, though, I simply would have told you. And why didn’t the person who sent them think you’d just ask me what it was all about? Unless--”

“What?” said Hermione.

“Unless they wanted to make it look artless. Wanted you to know it wasn’t from me. The question is, what would they expect you to do, knowing that the notes weren’t really from me?”

“Stay in the tower?” Ron suggested, grasping at straws.

“Possibly. But I think we have to cover all possibilities. I think you--” he pointed at Ron,” should stay here, keeping an eye on the portrait hole in case someone has gotten a hold of the password and decides to try coming in here. Hermione and I can go early to the Charms classroom and hide under the Invisibility Cloak, wait to see if anyone shows up.”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, nodded. Then Ron looked like he had a thought. “Maybe George could wait with me by the portrait hole...”

Harry looked over at George, sitting with Fred and Lee Jordan and playing Exploding Snap. “I don’t know,” Harry said. “No offense to George, but Ginny did a lot better at the duels than he did.” Then he could have bitten his tongue. Ginny had done better than Ron, too.

Ron thought of this. “Did better than me too. But I don’t want her involved in this.” Then Harry thought of Draco Malfoy, and agreed. But not for the same reason as Ron; he unfortunately had started to think of Ginny as a security risk. If Malfoy managed to get information out of her, even against her will, everything would be compromised. Somehow, he was convinced that Malfoy had sent the notes. And she’d already freely given Malfoy information before they were even a couple; he remembered her spilling the “Viktor Krum Plan” to him in the Potions Dungeon. Ginny should definitely not be involved.

“Well,” Harry said. “It’s ten-thirty now. Hermione and I should probably be in the classroom by eleven-fifteen to play it safe. We’ll need your help getting out the portrait hole, and then you need to bring down some homework, make it look like you’re hanging out late to work, so people don’t think it’s weird that you’re down here.” Harry stopped; he closed his mouth, looking at the two of them, worried. This was the next step; target his two best friends directly. Lure them out of the tower...or just make them all paranoid and lose sleep while they sat around the common room and the Charms classroom waiting for an attacker who was never going to show. There were just too many possibilities, it was impossible to plan for them all. This is what he had been expecting, for months and months. It had finally happened.

It was a good thing no one knew about him and Hermione. But then, he realized, Malfoy knew about that, too, to a certain extent. Damn! Malfoy knew way too much...

At eleven, Ron opened the portrait hole and went into the corridor. Harry and Hermione climbed out, hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. She was shaking. Ron closed the portrait; he said good luck to the two of them, then said the password again and reentered the common room.

Harry and Hermione walked cautiously to the Charms classroom. Why the Charms classroom? Harry wondered. Could whoever sent the notes know there was some kind of significance that room had for them? He was fairly certain that Malfoy didn’t know about those times. It was probably just a coincidence.

When they reached the classroom, the door was standing open, and they walked through the

doorway together, huddled closely under the cloak so they would both fit. As they passed through the opening, they heard a crackling noise that sounded to Harry like static electricity, and Harry felt a strange thrumming in his body, as though his veins were now conducting live current, not blood. Static electricity? But that sort of thing was impossible here, wasn't it? he thought. Standing near Flitwick's desk, he turned to Hermione under the cloak.

"Did you feel that?" he asked softly. She nodded, her lips pressed closed. She looked confused. "What do you think--"

"We can't afford to talk," she reminded him quietly. "It will have to wait."

They went to the far wall and sat in the corner, under the window, so they had a good view of the door. The minutes passed with agonizing slowness, and the longer Harry sat with her under the cloak, the more aware he became of her leg pressed up against his, her arm brushing his... They hadn't been this close for this long since Christmas break. He put his arm around her shoulder and she pillowed her head on his chest. They had to be very, very quiet...

But then he made the mistake of looking down at her and finding her looking up at him; he had to protect her, he had to! Voldemort and the Death Eaters would never touch her, not if he had anything to say about it. He continued to look down at her, traced her jaw with his finger, and was both surprised and not surprised when she pulled his face down to hers, opening her mouth under his.

Yes, thought Harry. This is how it's supposed to be. He wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly enough to make her part of him, feeling her arms snaking around him, her body's warmth against his. But they would have to stop in a minute, he thought. Before they couldn't control the noises emanating from deep in their throats, animal noises that had nothing to do with human speech or thought. They needed to stop before they wanted to do more, here in the worst place to do anything, with the possible exception of the Great Hall, with the entire school looking on...

He broke the kiss reluctantly, feeling her lips traveling along his jaw and up to his ear, then down his neck and along his collarbone as she pulled his robes aside. He shuddered; he would lose control in a second, if she kept that up. He still felt the strange thrumming throughout his body, as though he were leaning on Aunt Petunia's washing machine on Privet Drive. It didn't make sense, and it wasn't a response to what she was doing... He kissed her forehead, and with a greater show of self-control than he felt he really had, gently pulled her head onto his chest again, putting his finger over his lips and then showing her his watch. In ten minutes it would be midnight.

She sighed, sounding sad. He stroked her hair, having to be content with that, and they continued to wait. Five more minutes passed, and they heard footsteps in the corridor outside the classroom. The footsteps came closer and closer. Yes, thought Harry; it was definitely someone who was coming to the Charms classroom. But who?

When she passed through the doorway, Harry heard the same crackling he'd heard when he and Hermione had entered. What was that? he wanted to know. She whirled around, staring at the doorway, perplexed. Then she turned to look into the classroom again. She pulled out her wand and lit it, holding it up to see around the room.

“Harry? Are you here?” she said nervously.

It was Cho. Was that why she'd been talking to Lucius Malfoy at that Quidditch match? Did he have her under the Imperius Curse, told her to come after Ron and Hermione? But wait; he realized that she had said his name. She was looking for him, not Ron or Hermione. Perhaps someone had sent her a note from him also. Perhaps she too was being targeted. Malfoy! Why would he target her? He knew that Harry and Hermione were just trying to fix her up with Viktor Krum.

Harry looked at Hermione under the cloak. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged; she had no idea what to do any more than he did. If Harry emerged from under the cloak, it would be very difficult to avoid Cho seeing Hermione. Perhaps they should wait and see whether the person who sent the notes showed up, find out who it was, and if he tried to hurt Cho, then Harry could come out of hiding...

Cho pulled herself up onto Flitwick's desk, sighing, swinging her legs. Harry waited, his heart in his throat, wishing he had simply said thanks but no thanks when she'd asked him out in Diagon Alley in August. He should never have involved her. He remembered seeing her at the Quidditch match in his third year when he'd first really noticed her, noticed how pretty she was, and he was almost tempted to let her get the Snitch first, as a gesture of goodwill... Almost, but not quite. Oliver Wood would have killed him.

They all waited, Cho thinking she was alone, not knowing any better. Harry wanted very much to kiss Hermione again, but to say this was not a good time would be a colossal understatement. The minutes crawled by. Harry checked his watch: it was twelve-twenty-five. Cho looked pretty grumpy by now. She jumped down from the desk and walked back to the door; maybe someone was just trying to get his girlfriend and best friends hacked off at him by making appointments that weren't going to be kept?

She turned and looked at the room again, giving Harry the eerie feeling that she could see him. “Well,” she said, “if he's trying to make up with me, he's doing a lousy job.” She turned back to the doorway and walked through.

But as Cho was going through the doorway, she froze; the static sound was back. She seemed to be receiving some kind of shock throughout her body, as though she had tried to walk through an electric fence. Harry's heart was in his throat; he stood, making Hermione stand with him. He looked at her face; she wasn't exactly Cho's biggest fan, but now she too looked concerned. He mouthed at her, What should we do?

She shook her head; she had no idea. Finally, Cho collapsed onto the floor in the corridor right

outside the doorway. They walked toward the door, careful not to put any part of their bodies in the space between the jambs. There was some kind of field there that had been generated, a field that could be walked through safely when entering the room, but upon leaving...

They looked at Cho, lying motionless on the floor a few feet away. Harry stared at her back for a what seemed a long time, finally seeing some very slight movement. She was still alive; she was still breathing. However, he felt quite sure that if he and Hermione tried to go through the doorway, they would be in the same condition as Cho. They were trapped.

Who had done this? Harry wondered. He was sure it was some kind of Dark Magic. Another question was, how were they going to get out? They absolutely *had* to get out. All they need was for Mad-Eye Moody to investigate; he would spot them right away, with his magical eye. It would look very incriminating for him and Hermione to be sitting, lurking in the room where Cho had been right before she was--what? Zapped? Electrocuted? What had happened to her, precisely? Harry only knew he didn't want it happening to him. It was a clever trap; didn't require the person who had sent the notes to be present in order to ambush them. Walk in, walk out, put yourself into a coma. Very neat. Very evil.

Trapped, Harry thought again. He went over to the window, Hermione following him. He looked out; they were at least forty feet from the ground. No possibility of just hopping out the window. Maybe he could open one of the windows and summon his Firebolt...They could fly down. But it might attract some attention for his broom to come hurtling out of his dorm...

And then he realized that he didn't need his broom. He was nervous about it, but this was an emergency, and they had no other choice. He turned to face Hermione. "I know how to get us out of here," he said.

She looked at him expectantly. "Well?" she said after a long silence.

He removed the cloak from the two of them, folding it up and handing it to her. She frowned, putting it in her pocket, looking over her shoulder at the doorway; no one had come. He went to the windows; the first one he tried was stuck. So was the second. Then he realized that this was stupid, and pulled out his wand, saying, "Alohomora!" making the window fly open suddenly, banging into the stone frame of the one next to it.

"Harry!" said Hermione. "We're a bit high up to be going out the window, don't you think?"

He smiled at her. "Not if you can fly."

She made a face at him; he could tell she was wondering what he was on about. But suddenly he was changing, and in a blink, she saw before her not Harry Potter, dark-haired Harry with his familiar green eyes, his much-mended glasses and his scar, but a beautiful tawny lion, its golden mane looking soft and wild, its tail swishing like a rope that was alive. Hermione gasped.

Then he spread his wings.

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Chapter Twenty-Three Flight

Harry looked up at Hermione. She was so pale in the moonlight, he thought she might faint. He changed back to his human form and caught her just before she fell into a student desk, pulled out a chair and sat her in it. Her mouth was working soundlessly, and she stared at him with her brown eyes wide and unbelieving. He started to wonder whether he'd have to slap her or something to bring her back to her senses.

Finally, she regained the power of speech. "Harry! When--how--when--"

"Take a breath, Hermione," he told her, trying to be calm enough for both of them, which was a good trick when his heart was racing and all he could think was that any minute someone would come along and find Cho, and then they would see him and Hermione in the Charms classroom...

"We need to get onto the ledge and close the window behind us, Hermione. I've looked; it's a really wide ledge, practically a balcony. Then I'll change again and you can ride on my back. I'm going to see if I can get up to the Astronomy tower. We can get back into the castle from there."

"You're going to see *if* you can get up to the Astronomy tower? Harry, have you ever actually done this before?" He smiled; Hermione was back.

"Changing into a golden griffin, yes; flying, no."

She swallowed. "You've never flown before."

"Not without a broom. Or on a winged animal, like the golden griffin Hagrid had us studying. And there was the time we did hippogriffs."

Hermione hit her head with her hand. "Oh! That ride on Buckbeak..." Harry remembered how she'd hated that.

"You can hold onto my mane with your hands. You won't fall if you do that and put your legs around me very tightly," he said, then suddenly felt himself flush, thinking of her doing what he was talking about. Hermione didn't seem to notice; she looked at the open window as though it was the last place she wanted to go. She looked back toward the door to the room, as though she envied Cho.

But Harry had climbed up on the window sill and put out his hand to her. "We should go before

someone comes.” Hermione nodded and stood shakily, walking toward the window. She put her foot up on the sill and took his hand, swinging up in a single fluid motion. They closed the window behind them, shivering on the snowy ledge. He could see that she was trying not to look down. He could not resist looking down, however. Then, to get his bearings, he looked up instead; directly over the windows to the Charms classroom was a series of lion gargoyles, looking very similar to the bookends he’d given her for Christmas. He pointed them out to her.

“A good omen, do you think?”

She looked thoughtful, then turned to him, frowning. “I dropped Divination, remember?” But then she had to smile, and he returned it.

“Ready?”

She looked apprehensive again, but nodded. He changed once more, then spread his wings; she swung her leg over his back, sitting behind the strong gossamer appendages. He felt her warm weight on his back, then her thighs and knees clamping hard on his flanks, her fingers sinking into his mane. Good, he thought. Hopefully she’ll be safe.

Harry felt the purring motor within his body, felt the animal instinct emanating from his hide, his tail, his paws on the cold stone. He remembered the golden griffin from class, and thought about how it had taken flight. Finally, he decided that at the very least, with the wings, they could glide safely to the ground, even if he couldn’t get more height than they had now. He looked up toward the Astronomy Tower; several stories up and at the far end of the castle from where they were it might as well have been miles away. He took a deep breath and leapt off the ledge.

They plummeted.

Hermione screamed; Harry couldn’t seem to do anything with his wings. Finally, after what seemed a very long time but was probably only a second, he managed to locate the muscles to move his wings and to control their angle, so he could get lift, so he could get that differential in the air pressure above and below the wings. He was back at the same level as the Charms classroom, now a story above that, then a story higher. He was moving forward at the same time, soaring out over the grounds. He heard Hermione gasp above him, leaning forward, molding her body to his and lacing her fingers more firmly into his mane, her knees starting to hurt him from digging into his shoulders.

Now he was really flying, banking over the lake, heading back to the castle, the Astronomy Tower below them. Harry wanted to go on flying; he’d never felt so free! It wasn’t like using a broomstick at all. But that would have to be for another time. He’d gotten enough height, that was the important thing. He descended in tight, spiraling circles, coming closer and closer to the observation deck, until finally all four paws struck the flat surface which had been swept clear of snow for the third-year Hufflepuff and Slytherin class earlier that evening.

Once he had landed, Harry changed again immediately; he was almost as exhausted as when he

had been blocking the Hara Kiri curse. Immediately, his back protested against having Hermione sitting on his spine, her legs clamped tightly around his ribcage. Her hands were in his hair; she removed them hastily, then climbed off him, kneeling by his side. He was still trying to get his breath.

He rolled over onto his back, smiling up at her. "We did it," he said weakly.

She was frowning at him, though. Her expression reminded him of when his mum had slapped Snape in the Potions Dungeon. "Tell me why I shouldn't hex you and put boils all over your face right now, Harry Potter? When were you planning to tell me about this?"

He swallowed. "Hermione, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. You didn't tell anyone about your Time Turner, remember? I'm almost finished my training, except for learning flying--and I guess I just got a crash course in that. Without the crashing, fortunately."

She started to smile a little. "Fortunately," she agreed.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position; the pain of the transfiguration was hitting him now, and he wished he could just sink into a hot bath with some of Madam Pomfrey's fig-leaf pain reliever...

But they couldn't afford to think just of themselves right now. Cho was on the floor of the Charms corridor and they had to get help. "Hermione," he said, "we have to go back to Gryffindor Tower. We should get the map so we can see if anyone's moving around the castle before we try to go get help. Come on." He tried to stand then, and fell back to the ground. Hermione stifled a laugh.

"And you're telling me to come on? Here--" and she put out her hand. He didn't take it; instead he grasped her forearm, and she grasped his, like acrobats in the circus, and she hauled him to his feet. He put his arm across her shoulders, leaning on her heavily.

"It's a good thing you're vertically challenged; just the right height to be a good crutch for me..."

"Hey!" she objected to the reference to her height.

"I said it was a good thing, didn't I?" She grimaced, helping him down the stairs. "And anyway," he went on, "you're not that much shorter than me. I'm only five-foot nine."

She didn't comment. When they reached the bottom, they put on the Invisibility Cloak again and proceeded to Gryffindor Tower. While they were still under the cloak, he pulled her to him and kissed her gently. She didn't let him go afterward, but clutched at him, her head on his chest. He kissed the top of her head, leaned his cheek on her hair.

"What's going to happen?" she whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. She lift up the edge of the cloak and said, “Demiguise!” to the fat lady, who yawned sleepily, and, eyes still shut, opened the portrait hole. Harry saw Ron leap toward the entrance, then relax when he saw it was her.

“Where’s Harry?” he wanted to know.

“Here,” he said, taking off the cloak. They both climbed in, closing the portrait. Ron looked at them expectantly.

“Well?” he said finally, looking like he was going to jump out of his skin. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, frowning.

“You and Hermione weren’t the only ones to get notes,” Harry said. “Cho got one too, and thought I was trying to make up with her. She waited a while, and then when she decided to go, she--I’m not sure what happened. She sort of looked shocked. Then she collapsed on the corridor floor outside the classroom. She was breathing, but unconscious. When Hermione and I went into the room, it felt like we passed through something, some kind of field in the doorway, and we could tell that Cho felt it too, when she entered. But it didn’t have a bad effect on her until she went through it again...The only thing I ever encountered that was like it was when I was in the maze during the third task. There was this thing I passed through, and it was like having the Inverso charm put on me. That was why I knew it would be a good one for dueling; I remembered the feeling of hanging upside-down in the air in the maze. I probably wasn’t, I was probably on the ground the whole time, but it sure felt--”

“Harry,” Hermione interrupted him. “We need to get help for Cho.”

“Right,” Harry agreed.

“Wait!” Ron stopped him. “If Cho could enter safely, like you, but not leave safely--how did you two get out? Why didn’t it affect you?”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, Harry looking guilty.

“Tell him, Harry. Or show him.”

Harry nodded. “Ron, I’ve been getting some--private tutoring from McGonagall. After dinner every night.”

Ron made a face. “What’s that go to do with--” he started to say, but suddenly, he wasn’t speaking to Harry; he saw before him a lion, a real lion, fur and claw and tooth and mane and bright green eyes and wings...

And wings?

“H-Harry!” he stuttered, not even sure whether he should be calling this creature by Harry’s

name. Harry reappeared abruptly, and Ron wasn't sure whether he'd been awake too long and had hallucinated. He turned uncertainly to Hermione.

"Did--did you just see that too? Am I crazy?"

"No, Ron," she said, her face serious. "Harry is an Animagus."

"An Animagus!"

"A golden griffin Animagus, to be precise," Harry said now. "A good thing, too. Originally, I was just going to be a lion. But we never could have gotten out of the Charms classroom if I'd done that."

Ron was just staring at him, openmouthed. "Then--then how--"

"Flew," Hermione said simply. "We landed on the observation deck of the Astronomy tower, then came back down here."

"Can--can I see it again?"

Harry put his right hand behind his neck and rubbed it. "Could I not? I'm pretty achy. I'd never flown before..."

"You never flew before?" Ron yelled now. Harry and Hermione hushed him.

"Yes!" Harry yelled in a whisper. "I'd never flown before, and Hermione was riding on my back..."

Ron looked miffed now, perhaps thinking, as Harry had, about her legs wrapped around him...

"Well," he said, looking at her levelly. "I've picked her up. She's like a feather." Hermione colored, looked away. Harry frowned.

"She wasn't on your back."

Ron couldn't argue with this, and clearly didn't want to think about Hermione being on Harry's back, so he shut up. Harry went to the stairs leading to their dorm; before he went up, he saw that Ron and Hermione were standing awkwardly near the portrait hole; Hermione was gazing at the fire, while Ron was gazing at her.

Harry shook himself. Focus, he thought. He retrieved the map from his trunk and hurried back downstairs, laying the parchment on a table and waving his wand over it while Ron and Hermione came over to watch.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

When the map appeared, they easily found the Charms classroom with the tiny dot right outside the doorway labeled “Cho Chang.” Then they saw three minuscule dots moving down the Charms corridor. Two were labeled, “Roger Davis” and “Niamh Quirke” and the third one was Professor Flitwick.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. “Look, they’ve come looking for her. That makes sense. Niamh and Roger are the seventh-year Ravenclaw prefects. He’s Head Boy, sure, but he’s still a prefect too. And they brought Flitwick, since he’s their head-of-house.”

They nodded. Hermione got a sudden revelatory look on her face. “Oh, Harry! What if the thing in the doorway isn’t Dark Magic? What if it’s just some kind of--security spell that Flitwick puts on his classroom?”

“I’ve been in there before at odd hours,” Harry said, not mentioning that it was to snog with her. “It’s never been there before.”

“Maybe he just recently started doing it.”

“I hope so, because that would mean he knows what happened to Cho, and should be able to reverse it. But even if Flitwick is the one who charmed the doorway, someone tried to lure you two and Cho there, probably knowing what would happen to anyone who entered the room, then tried to leave it. The source of the field may possibly be Flitwick, but I doubt that he sent the notes.”

Then they noticed that the small Flitwick dot was moving into the classroom. “Maybe he’s disabling the field,” Hermione speculated, hoping. The Flitwick dot emerged from the classroom again, then all four dots moved through the corridors, up and down staircases. They watched, fascinated.

“Do you suppose they revived her? You think she’s all right?” said Ron.

Harry shrugged. Hermione frowned. “No,” she said. “They’re taking her to the hospital wing.”

They watched the four dots enter the hospital wing after traveling together for a few minutes. They saw the Madam Pomfrey dot flitting back and forth, tending to Cho, whose dot moved to the vicinity of the beds. Madam Pomfrey moved back and forth between Flitwick and Cho, and then Flitwick also moved to the bed area. Harry assumed he was checking on Cho before leaving. But his dot stayed there; only Roger’s and Niamh’s dots left the hospital wing.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked no one in particular. “Flitwick is still there!”

Hermione bit her lip. “Maybe he didn’t put that field in the doorway to his classroom. Maybe it got him too...”

All three of them looked at each other in alarm. A teacher was hurt now. Funny little Professor Flitwick, young Will's great uncle. Flitwick who didn't even scold Neville for repeatedly flying him across the classroom...Probably the nicest professor they had. Sprout was nice too, of course, and Hagrid was their friend. But Flitwick didn't make them mess around with bubotubers or Blast-Ended Skrewts. He'd positively gushed about Harry's summoning charm during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. He'd also congratulated Harry on being captain of the Dueling Club, and he'd been a champion dueler in his youth. Harry didn't think it was possible to feel worse than when he had first heard from Sirius about how bad the tube station explosion had been, but now he found that he was wrong. This was different; he *knew* Professor Flitwick.

Had Voldemort expected Harry to somehow find him and throw himself on his mercy after the Underground blew up? Is that why he was coming after his friends now? But he doubted that Voldemort himself had entered Hogwarts. Someone here was doing his bidding. Perhaps someone who had recently received the Dark Mark...

"There's nothing we can do right now," he said firmly. "Cho and Flitwick are with Madam Pomfrey. She'll take care of them. We'll talk to Dumbledore tomorrow, tell him what we saw in the Charms classroom. I doubt anyone else will be going in there tonight. In the morning, we can stop by before going running and close and lock the door, put a sign on it about Professor Flitwick being sick, so no one will try to go in. We're probably the first ones up everyday, except for the house elves, so that should do the trick." He looked at Ron and Hermione now, at how tired they were, how scared. "We should all get some rest. This whole thing came as a surprise. We tried to deal with it--but obviously we didn't know what we were up against." He didn't say it aloud, but he wished he had gone to Snape when Ron and Hermione had told him about the notes. He would have known the right thing to do, Harry felt sure. Or what not to do, at any rate. Surely they hadn't.

He waved his wand over the map, saying dispiritedly, "Mischief managed." Someone had managed some mischief, thought Harry. And he felt sure that more was coming.

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Professor McGonagall was waiting for him in the hall outside the common room when he and Hermione came down to run the next morning.

"Potter!" she said simply, looking very stern. "Come with me." He looked over his shoulder at Hermione, who was frowning. She went down the staircase they usually took to get to the Great Hall; he followed McGonagall to her office, her stiff, straight shoulders looking uncompromising and forbidding.

When he was sitting before her desk, she fixed him with a cold eye, and he shivered. "Harry," she said, using his first name for the first time in a very long time (he could probably count the times on one hand), "I'm very disappointed in you. You're a prefect, you're doing so well in the

Dueling Club and in your Animagus Training. Then your girlfriend breaks up with you, and you do something like this..."

Harry frowned. "What? Something like what? What are you talking about?" Had Cho Chang died? Had Flitwick? No, he decided; she wouldn't be sitting in her office with him, calling him Harry if she were accusing him of murder. But she was certainly accusing him of something.

"How did you know about her breaking up with me?" he asked quietly. She gave him that look Sirius had given him when he tried to make him think he and Hermione had been sleeping in separate beds.

"Practically everyone in the school who was in Hogsmeade yesterday knows about it, and the rest know about it from those who were there. Word travels fast around here."

Especially word about Harry Potter, he thought bitterly. Some people probably couldn't wait to gloat about him being dumped, not having any idea he'd been *trying* to get dumped for months. "I still don't understand--"

"Cho Chang was found last night in the corridor outside the Charms classroom. Her roommates told Davies that she'd received a note from you, asking her to meet you in the Charms classroom at midnight. They saw your snowy owl deliver it. When she hadn't returned and it was after one in the morning, Niamh Quirke convinced Davies and Professor Flitwick that they should go looking for her. They found her unconscious; no rejuvenation spell they tried worked at reviving her. Professor Flitwick went into the classroom to see whether anyone was there, then left the room, and when he passed through the door again, he was stricken in the same way as Chang, and has also been unconscious ever since. Davies and Quirke took them to the infirmary, and it is my understanding that Madam Pomfrey has still been unable to reverse the effect of--of whatever it was you did to them."

"Whatever I did?" Harry tried not to yell, but it was difficult in the face of such an accusation.

"Davies and Quirke determined that whatever happened to them, it had something to do with passing into the classroom and then out of it again. They closed and sealed the door, to protect others. Charms classes are of course canceled until further notice. What do you have to say for yourself, Potter?"

He was back to being Potter. He didn't know whether that was good or bad. "Can I ask you something, Professor McGonagall?"

"What?"

"Have I ever before made you think I would do such a thing?"

Her face softened toward him momentarily. "No," she had to admit.

“Well, I didn’t do this. Can we--can we meet with Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape? Then I can explain everything to you.”

“Why Professor Snape?”

“Well--we’re getting along better these days. Sort of. I just think it would be a good idea.”

She lit the fire in the grate and threw in some powder from a bowl on the mantel, saying, “Severus Snape.” It took about a minute before Snape’s face finally appeared in the fire, his eyes not quite opened, squinting up at McGonagall.

“What? Why are you pestering me at this hour on a Sunday?” he said testily.

She ignored his tone. “Severus, please come to the headmaster’s office immediately. I am bringing Harry Potter.”

Snape’s eyes were open wider now; he noticed Harry sitting in the chair before her desk. “Potter? What’s he done now?”

“You will find out,” was all she would tell him. The call was abruptly terminated. Snape’s face disappeared. She extinguished the fire and marched Harry into the corridor. As they walked to Dumbledore’s office, Harry decided to casually strike up conversation.

“How’s Rita? I guess it’s a good thing Dumbledore asked her to work for him, since she was able to get the samples from the Krums...”

“Yes, it was. She’s actually more useful than I would have--” Then she stopped and stared at him. “How did you know--”

“You can trust me, Professor McGonagall. Really. And you know about--my godfather, don’t you?” She looked back at him appraisingly, nodding. “And you know who really betrayed my parents?” She nodded again. He breathed a sigh of relief. They resumed walking. He could feel her eyes on him as they approached the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office.

“Chocolate-coated pumpkin pasty,” she said to the gargoyle. The wall opened and they went up the moving spiral stairs to Dumbledore’s office. He was waiting for them; a few minutes after they had entered, Snape arrived.

“Well,” Dumbledore began cheerfully. “I don’t think we’ve all been in the same room at the same time this year except to eat meals! And yet--we probably should have had a meeting before this. Pity it has to be now. Harry? Can you tell us anything about last night?”

Harry swallowed. Dumbledore didn’t think he had anything to do with what happened to Cho and Flitwick, did he? “After my--my training, I--”

“Training?” Snape spat. “What training?”

Dumbledore looked at McGonagall. “He’s almost done, isn’t he Minerva? Surely another teacher can know now, particularly Severus.”

She nodded, then turned to Snape. “Harry has been receiving Animagus training from me. It’s been--what, Harry? About five months?--and he’s almost done. Albus and I have talked to the Ministry of Magic about delaying his registration until he graduates, for his own safety. You understand why we didn’t mention this before?”

Snape nodded reluctantly, looking at Harry. “I’m sorry I’m interrupted. Go on,” he said to Harry grumpily; he looked even more upset than Hermione that he hadn’t known. So much for building trust, Harry thought.

“Well, when I got back upstairs, I found out that someone had used Hedwig to deliver notes to Ron and Hermione asking them to meet me in the Charms classroom at midnight.” He described to them the different theories they came up with, and the plan for Ron to guard the portrait hole while he and Hermione waited in the classroom in the Invisibility Cloak.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “You could have come to me or Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape for help. You didn’t have to do this yourself.”

Harry grimaced. “I thought of that later. I’m sorry. I need to remember to--to rely on others more.” Most headmasters, he thought, would have told him that he *should* have come to them, not he *could* have. He felt worse than ever.

He described how surprised they were when Cho showed up, that he hadn’t known she’d received a note, the way she’d passed out through the doorway again and then fallen over, unconscious.

“How did you get out of the room, then?” Snape genuinely sounded like he wanted to know, through his surliness. He hemmed and hawed, then gave in.

“Don’t be mad, Professor McGonagall, Professor Dumbledore. I didn’t want whatever happened to Cho to happen to me or Hermione. I--I had to show her my--my Animagus form. So we could use the window to get out.” He looked at Professor McGonagall with a smile now. “I flew us out of there and up to the Astronomy Tower. It was--amazing to fly like that...”

McGonagall was actually smiling now. “You did it? You flew? On the first try?”

“Well--” Harry said reluctantly. “Actually, I fell, at first. But I recovered in time.”

“Flew?” Snape spat. “And you were able to carry a fifteen-year-old girl? What are you, a sea eagle?”

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at Harry. "Show him, Harry."

Well, it was an order from the headmaster. So Harry stood and pushed his chair out of the way. He was getting very fast at the change. In a matter of seconds, he felt his paws land on the floor, felt his tail swishing, the mane around his face, the motor inside him pulsing insistently, a dull ache through all his bones.

"A lion?" Snape said, confused. "But you said you flew..."

So Harry spread his wings, turning his head to see them; the early morning light coming in Dumbledore's windows made iridescent colors appear in the window-pane-like segments. He looked up at Snape, satisfied to see him speechless.

He changed back into his human form, looking at them all. He sat in his chair again, stiffly, his joints aching. He didn't go on; he didn't feel like revealing the existence of the map to Professor McGonagall. Snape knew about the map already, but he wasn't sure about Dumbledore. He didn't want to risk losing his map. He was lucky he'd gotten it back from Lupin, in third year, and from Crouch, when he was masquerading as Moody. It was too useful to lose. These were allies, but still--

"So, you returned to Gryffindor Tower and went to bed, leaving that poor girl in the corridor?" McGonagall said accusingly.

"No; I took Hermione back and went to the Charms corridor in the cloak," he lied. "I saw Roger and Niamh and Flitwick were coming, so I left; I figured they would take her to the hospital wing. I had no idea Professor Flitwick would wind up in the infirmary too...I'm sorry I had to show someone that I'm an Animagus."

McGonagall looked at him shrewdly. "You didn't show anyone else, did you?"

"No," he lied, thinking of Ron and Neville. Neville was accidental, but Ron wasn't. He was just tired of having secrets from him, and Hermione knew now. It was getting too tiring keeping track of who knew what.

"Well," she said, as though relieved. "I'm glad you did that instead of something stupid like trying to levitate yourselves down. You probably would have wound up a mile over the castle..."

"I know it's hard to control that spell. It's not exactly my favorite. Although, it is one of Hermione's. I'm surprised she didn't suggest it."

"Hmph! Miss Granger knows as well as you do that it is unpredictable when applied to humans. The usual result is the person shooting straight up into the air with no control whatsoever..."

“Now, now, Minerva,” Dumbledore broke in. “We’ve established that Harry did the right thing. The questions we are faced with now are, who cursed the doorway of the Charms classroom? Who used Harry’s owl to send his friends notes that seemed to be from him? And why?”

They all looked around at each other, at a loss. Harry was about to say something, only about twenty times, but lost his nerve each time. The silence stretched, until finally, Dumbledore said, “Well. We’ll all think about that. I won’t assume as yet that anyone has managed to get into the castle from the outside. Of course, that would mean a student or teacher has done this. Also not a pleasant thought.”

McGonagall nodded, as did Snape. Harry grimaced. Dumbledore stood. “Sorry to cut short your morning run, Harry. Go down now, while you still have a little time before breakfast. I have something else to discuss with Professors Snape and McGonagall.” Harry nodded and left, wondering what that could be about. Maybe it was just school business.

He went down to the Great Hall and found Hermione sitting at the Gryffindor table, looking down at her hands. He sat next to her, put his hand on her shoulder. She didn’t look at him.

“Hermione? Have you done any running yet?”

She shook her head, still not looking at him. Finally, she spoke. “It’s all my fault. Cho. I should have nixed the whole idea from the start. We never should have involved her. I’m not--not especially fond of her, but she doesn’t deserve this...” She swallowed; he could see how eaten up she was. Hermione was too principled not to feel responsible about something like this.

“No,” he said. “It was my stupid idea. Don’t blame yourself. I’m--I’m not feeling particularly like running today. What I really want to do is--”

“What?”

He drew his lips into a line. “Find Draco Malfoy and bash in his skull. No magic involved. Just lots of hitting and blood and real pain. No illusions.” His voice was hard; she looked at him, her eyes a little scared. He knew he didn’t usually talk like this; he felt changed somehow, after the last several weeks, after the Westminster tube station and now the trap in the Charms classroom. He didn’t feel like the same person anymore.

They sat in silence, staring in opposite directions, not touching. After they’d been sitting like that for a very long time, Harry heard a step near the entrance to the hall. He turned his head quickly; the thin, pale figure stood in the doorway, elegant black school robes with a silver prefect badge over a crisp white shirt and black trousers, as though he were ready for inspection, his fine pale hair still slightly damp from being washed, his eyes empty and scared. Scared? Harry thought. He’d better be scared. Of me.

Draco Malfoy strode over to them, starting to speak when he was about ten feet away. “Potter. We have to talk.”

Hermione looked like she felt at a disadvantage, wearing her running clothes, even though at this time of year it wasn't revealing; she had a sweatshirt and sweatpants on with a terry cloth sweatband holding her hair off her face. Harry somehow felt it was to his advantage that he was wearing his sweats and a sleeveless T-shirt; Malfoy looked at his bare arms as if wondering what Harry could do if he were hacked off enough, perhaps remembering the incident on the train.

“So. Talk.” Harry was terse, cold.

“Not here...”

“All right,” Harry said, standing. He walked over to the anteroom where he had Animagus training, Hermione and Malfoy following. When they reached the door, Harry opened it and waved the other two through. Malfoy made a face at Hermione.

“Get out, Granger. This is between me and Potter.”

“Hermione knows everything, Malfoy. She stays. Ron knows too, by the way.”

Malfoy did the impossible and turned even paler than usual. “Everything?”

“Well--not everything. He knows about Christmas night.” They were all in the room now, and Harry closed the door.

Malfoy gave a sigh of relief, but still eyed Hermione suspiciously. “Why'd you tell them?”

“I'm the one asking the questions this time, Malfoy. Why did you use my owl to send those notes to Ron and Hermione and Cho? What did you do to the doorway of the Charms classroom?”

Malfoy swallowed. “That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't know.”

“What don't you know?”

“I didn't know about any bloody notes, but I know now that something was done to the Charms classroom doorway and I don't bloody know who did that either!” he shouted at Harry, sounding very frightened. Not knowing suddenly seemed much more frightening to Malfoy than any physical pain his father might be able to inflict upon him.

He went on. “Snape called all of the Slytherins into our common room a few minutes ago. He said all of the heads-of-house were doing the same thing--except for Flitwick. Dumbledore was handling Ravenclaw. Snape said that Cho Chang and Professor Flitwick were in the hospital wing, unconscious, because someone had put a curse on the doorway to the Charms classroom. He said that whoever did it would most likely be expelled; it had all the appearances

of Dark Magic.”

He paused, having been speaking very fast, very nervously. He looked at Harry now. “You said something about notes; Snape didn’t mention anything about notes.”

“Last night, someone went up to the Owlery and used Hedwig to send notes to Cho, Ron and Hermione asking them to come to the Charms classroom at midnight to talk to me. The notes looked completely genuine, as though I’d written them myself. Ron and Hermione asked me why the Charms classroom, why midnight, and I told them I hadn’t sent the notes. We didn’t realize Cho had received one. Evidently, there is some kind of field that someone has put on the doorway of the classroom so that you can pass into the room, but when you leave, it knocks you out. At least, I think it just knocks you out. Cho and Flitwick are in comas, and Pomfrey hasn’t been able to bring them around. They’re still alive, but no one can wake them up.”

Malfoy paced, running his hand through his hair. “I cannot believe this...”

“What can’t you believe?”

He looked at Harry and Hermione as though deciding how much to tell them. “I wrote to my dad, told him about Moody seeing the Mark. I did something stupid; I asked him how he could let me get the Mark when that ex-Auror with that damn eye is working here.”

Harry remembered when he’d been out in the middle of the night the year before, taking his Triwizard clue, the large golden egg, to the prefects’ bathroom. He’d wound up with his leg stuck in a trick step, under his Invisibility Cloak, while Filch and Snape and Crouch (looking like Moody) stood around arguing about the egg he’d dropped. Crouch had looked at Snape’s left forearm, covered by his nightshirt, and said, “There are some spots that don’t come off.” At the time, Snape had looked afraid of someone he thought was an ex-Auror who seemed to doubt whether he had really changed sides. After Snape and Filch had gone, and Crouch had helped Harry remove his leg from the step, he had said, “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a Death Eater who walked free.” Harry later realized that he’d meant a Death Eater who didn’t go to jail, as he had, showing complete loyalty to Voldemort, but who had turned around and given evidence against other Death Eaters. People like Snape and Karkaroff, who had made deals. Perhaps especially Snape, the one who had recruited Crouch when he was still in school...

Harry looked at Malfoy. “What did he say?”

“He said that if I was too incompetent to keep Moody from seeing my Mark, he would find someone else to do the work he had expected me to do, and that the Dark Lord would be very disappointed in me. Then I started getting these owls from someone here at Hogwarts; they were school owls, different one each time. The notes that were sent asked me to get some samples of your writing. So I did; I took some old homework out of your bag when you weren’t paying attention in Hagrid’s class. Potions requires too much vigilance to avoid the cauldron going wrong. You really ought to watch your stuff more carefully, Potter.”

“Obviously.”

Hermione spoke for the first time. “Who sent you the owls?” she wanted to know, sounding impatient.

“How the hell should I know?” he shouted at her, still pacing. Harry felt like knocking him down and kneeling on his stomach, starting to rain down blows upon him...

“Whoever it is, I don’t think they’re in Slytherin. The other Slytherins were looking pretty surprised when I got mail from a school owl at breakfast, every time it happened. None of them are smart enough or good enough at acting to pull that off convincingly. Hufflepuffs are unlikely, I suppose, but I wonder sometimes whether that’s a red herring--haven’t any Dark Wizards *ever* come from Hufflepuff? There has to be someone; even Ravenclaw and Gryffindor have produced them.”

“Not as many as Slytherin house,” Harry said tensely, still restraining himself.

“Yeah, yeah. House fight for some other time, Potter. This is important. I’m in as much danger as you now, you know.”

“My heart bleeds. I’m still not convinced that you’re not making all of this up. Maybe if you could give me some idea of who it might be...”

“The only lead I have is--I think it’s a prefect.”

Hermione looked very alert now. “Why?”

Malfoy drew his lips into a line. “I always sit in the same place for the prefects’ meetings. Last time, a piece of parchment belonging to you that I had sent back with one of the school owls was on my desk after the meeting. I didn’t even see how it got there. Someone at the meeting managed to do it. In a bit of space where there wasn’t already writing, they’d written, ‘THANKS.’”

“What did the handwriting look like?” Hermione wanted to know. Malfoy reached into the pocket of his robes.

“Take a look.”

Harry and Hermione examined it; it wasn’t very helpful. Just large block letters. Not really handwriting at all. Harry recognized a corner of his Hamlet essay.

“It’s possible that whichever prefect it was did it because someone else asked them to. It doesn’t mean our other junior Death Eater is a prefect,” Hermione pointed out. Harry was a little annoyed with her.

“Just because someone is a prefect doesn’t make them beyond reproach, Hermione.”

“And that includes Head Boys and Head Girls,” agreed Malfoy, surprising Harry. “Potter--that Head Girl, Spinnet, from your house. Do you think she’s okay?”

“You mean do I think she could be a Death Eater? I dunno, Malfoy--do you think Voldemort’s recruiting Muggle-born witches now?”

“Oh. She’s Muggle-born? And she duels like that? The three of us and Ginny are the only ones who were able to beat her.”

Hermione drew herself up to her full five-foot-three inches and glared at Malfoy. “I’m Muggle-born, Malfoy. Remember dueling with me?” she said softly, dangerously. He backed up a step.

“I just mean--are you sure she’s Muggle-born? Couldn’t she just say that to throw people off?”

“Well, let’s see,” said Hermione, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Her parents raise thoroughbred race horses in Devon and she was going to train to be an Olympic equestrienne until she got her Hogwarts letter, so yes, Malfoy, I’m fairly certain her parents are Muggles. Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson have visited her on holiday. She’s legitimate Muggle-born.”

Malfoy looked thoughtful, smiling. “Spinnet, riding a horse...there’s an image...”

Harry glared at him. “I’ll tell you-know-who...”

“You’ll tell the Dark Lord I said that about Spinnet?”

“I call him Voldemort. You know who I’m talking about.”

He made a face. “Well, if I weren’t trying to be so damn good when I’m with her, my mind wouldn’t be wandering like this...”

Harry shook his head. “First Parvati, now Alicia...”

Hermione was baffled. “What about Parvati? Who are you talking about?”

Harry looked at her. “I thought you said you’d guessed who Ginny was going to meet.”

Hermione sighed. “Oh, is that all you’re talking about. You’d better be good when you’re with her, Malfoy. She won’t be fifteen until April.”

“And you’ll keep on behaving yourself even after her birthday, if you know what’s good for you,” Harry warned. Hermione looked at him strangely when he said this.

“All right, all right. Enough about my private, er, thoughts. What about Head Boy? Is Davies all

right?" Harry's and Hermione's faces fell. They looked at each other nervously. Malfoy looked back and forth between them. "What? What? Oh, come on."

"It's just that--" Hermione began.

"He's so--" Harry ventured.

"I don't know how to put it--"

"All right, all right!" Malfoy interrupted. "So. You don't trust him. You don't know why, but you don't trust him. Does that about sum it up?" They both nodded.

Then Harry thought of something. "When he and Niamh and Flitwick went looking for Cho, Roger didn't go into the classroom..."

"Yes, but Niamh didn't go in either. I trust her," Hermione said.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Why do you trust her?"

Hermione made a face. "I just do. I don't know..."

"And how do you know what Davies and Quirke did?" Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked like she was biting her tongue. Harry saw an expression of understanding dawning on Malfoy's face. "Oh--were you using that parchment thing again? To track their movements. Wish to hell I had one of those things..."

"Keep wishing, Malfoy. It's not going to happen. And even without that, we could have figured it out; I mean, Roger and Niamh aren't in the hospital wing like Cho and Flitwick, are they?"

Malfoy nodded. "Well, you want to know a reason why I don't trust Davies?" They looked at him expectantly. "Who do you think really should have been Head Boy this year?"

Harry and Hermione thought hard. "Well," Harry said, "Not Fred or George. They weren't prefects already, anyway."

"And none of the Slytherins. No offense. I'm sure there have been Slytherin Head Boys, but--" Hermione contributed.

Malfoy sighed deeply. "You two are so thick. Diggory! He was the golden boy, the front runner! But since he was killed by the Dark Lord, that opened the way for Davies! Don't you see? Davies is in his debt..."

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Yes! But the question is--just because he technically owes being Head Boy to Voldemort killing Cedric, does that necessarily mean that he would feel obliged to pay that debt?"

Malfoy shrugged. "That's all I have to go on. I'm clean out of ideas now."

Hermione had been looking fiercely at the fireplace. "But whoever this person is who sent the notes, they didn't do a very good job, did they? I mean, they were also trying to lure me and Ron to the Charms classroom, and we didn't fall for it. Couldn't you write to your father and ask for another chance, point out how this person failed?"

Malfoy thought about this. "Trouble is--I wouldn't know about the other notes unless I'd been talking to you. And then *he'd* know I'd been talking to you; that's no good. I'd be in even worse trouble."

Harry was the one pacing now, scowling. "We have to come up with a way to communicate with you. Maybe I can send you a school owl; the Slytherins have already gotten used to seeing you get stuff from them..."

Malfoy shook his head. "No, you prat. Whoever's really been sending them will see if I start getting school owls from someone else. Don't be stupid."

Harry fought the urge to respond. The three of them were silent, brooding. They heard a sound of footsteps in the Great Hall, indicating that some students were starting to come in for breakfast. Hermione went to the door and opened it a crack. She waved the boys over.

"Not that many people yet. If we're careful, no one will notice us coming out of here."

She went first, then Harry. Malfoy hung back. Harry tried to get him to come, but he said, "In a while. Give anybody time who saw you two come out of here to forget about it." Harry nodded. He and Hermione went to sit down at the Gryffindor table. It seemed a long time later that Malfoy came strolling out of the door casually, went to the Slytherin table and sat down. Harry glanced around the hall. Had anyone seen? Then he found that he was face to face with Ginny. He hadn't even noticed he'd sat down next to her. She was frowning at him.

"Harry, were you and Hermione talking to Draco?" she whispered. "What are you doing to him now?" she accused. Harry faced Hermione across the table, talking to Ginny out of the corner of his mouth, very softly.

"It wasn't about you. Prefect stuff. Don't worry about it."

But while they were eating, Ginny kept throwing him looks as if she wasn't sure what she could believe. She wasn't the only one throwing him funny looks; the entire school seemed to be aware of the "fact" that on the night that Cho Chang broke up with Harry Potter, he tricked her into going to the Charms classroom at midnight and ambushed her with a curse that had put her, and then the beloved Professor Flitwick, into a coma.

The heads of house hadn't said that Harry had done it; they'd said that no one knew. But the

word had spread from Cho's Ravenclaw roommates that she'd gotten the note from Harry and had assumed that he wanted to apologize and make up. No amount of naysaying from the teachers was adequate to quash the rumors about what Harry had done in a fit of pique after Cho had dumped him so publicly. Even the other Gryffindors were giving him funny looks.

Harry squirmed and tried to finish his breakfast as quickly as possible without looking too guilty. It was worse than second year, when everyone thought he was the heir of Slytherin. But he wasn't guilty of anything then, except being a Parselmouth. And now he did feel a bit responsible for what had happened to Cho, for involving her in the Viktor Krum Plan and letting her and everyone else think he was interested in her. All it had done was to make her a target. That was how he should have known it wasn't Malfoy who'd done it; Malfoy knew all about the Viktor Krum Plan.

They had to figure out who was sending Malfoy the owls. Harry had left Sandy upstairs when he had planned to go running; he decided to make sure he was wearing her as much as possible in future so that she could warn him about anything important that was going to happen. Such as becoming a scapegoat who was accused of attacking the most popular student and the most popular teacher in the school...

* * * * *

"Harry Potter."

"Yes?"

"Why are we here?"

"I'm hiding."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Should you be somewhere now?"

"Prefect meeting."

"You do not like the meetings?"

"I hate them."

"But your custom is to attend them."

"Yes."

“Then my question should have been, why have you gone in the past?”

“I’m supposed to.”

“How long will we be here?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll check the time.”

Harry pulled out his wand and lit it. He held up his watch to the light. It was just after nine o’clock. The meeting had been going for about half-an-hour. After his Animagus training, he had retrieved Sandy and pretended to Alicia that he was going to be at the meeting soon; the Gryffindor prefects usually walked there together. Instead, Harry went to the third-floor corridor and hid once more in the room where Fluffy had once held sway, as he had hidden from Hermione during the Christmas holiday. He had been sitting in the dark, letting the quiet cold seep into his bones, rather enjoying the fact of the hard stone floor, the complete lack of comfort, in an I-deserve-to-suffer sort of way.

But he preferred not to think of himself as a martyr; Cho and Flitwick and the people who had died in the Underground were martyrs. They were Voldemort’s victims and didn’t even know it. He was Voldemort’s target. He knew it. He knew that he was to blame for Cho and Flitwick being in the hospital wing. He also knew he could not withstand the accusing stares of the other prefects at the meeting, even though he was not specifically guilty of the thing of which he was accused. It was like Cedric all over again...

Going to Dueling Club that afternoon had been bad enough. For the second week, they were screening the four new members. All of them but Pansy Parkinson were going to be staying in the club. Unfortunately for some of the people who had been ranked at the bottom after the first four weeks, that meant they were no longer members. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Colin Creevey were cut, as was Millicent Bulstrode (Hermione refrained--just barely--from doing a dance of glee).

Liam Quirke was rather put-out about Justin being cut, and appeared ready to complain to Snape about it, but he had just squeaked in at number sixteen, so he looked like he decided not to press his luck. The trouble was, three of the new people were just too good to let the others stay. Fred Weasley had won a surprising fifteen out of nineteen duels in his two weeks, putting him at number five, after Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Alicia. And Roger Davies’ brother Evan was next, number six, with fourteen wins. Malfoy had only thirteen and was ranked seventh now.

Roger was very miffed about being eighth, but at least now he was directing his ire at his brother, Harry thought. Snape had eliminated their earlier duels with the cut members in order to recalculate the standings; Malfoy hadn’t won against Fred or Evan, whereas he had against the cut members, so his wins went down. The other new member was Lee Jordan, who had performed well on a respectable nine out of nineteen duels, and was ranked right after Roger.

Ron was somewhat disgruntled about having moved down to twelfth, after Crabbe and Angelina.

Harry had avoided eye-contact with Ravenclaws--indeed, with most people--during the duels. Fortunately, he only needed to duel once, and otherwise, only needed to be present to vote for the winners. All of the duels were pretty clear cut, except for Fred and Evan, who were very well matched, and Harry went with Fred partly out of house loyalty, but mostly because he had disarmed Evan (who nonetheless received a number of votes from Ravenclaws).

“Harry Potter,” Sandy said again.

“Yes, Sandy?”

“How long will we be here?”

“Oh, sorry. My mind wandered. We could be here for another hour.”

“Will it be time for sleeping then?”

“Not quite. I have an essay to finish writing for Charms--” he started to say, then realized that he actually didn’t need to bother with that. He swallowed, trying not to think of poor little Flitwick...

Suddenly, the door he was leaning against swung open into the corridor, and Harry fell backward. He was lying flat on the corridor floor now, the back of his head aching, looking up at a very smug Draco Malfoy standing over him.

“So, Potter,” he drawled, “this is where you come to hide from your adoring public.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, still lying down. “The adoring public that wants to flay me alive, behead me, and feed my body to the giant squid in the lake.”

“Ah, the price of fame...” Malfoy was enjoying himself.

“What the hell are you doing here, Malfoy? How did you find me?”

“That parchment of yours...”

Harry sat up, panicking. “The map? How did you--”

“Oh! It’s a map!” He smiled. “Didn’t mean to tell me that, did you? Don’t get your knickers in a twist, I still haven’t actually had a chance to look at the thing.”

Harry stood up slowly, glaring at him. “Is there a reason for you to be here Malfoy? Other than annoying me? You don’t actually need to show up in person, you know. Just the fact of your

existence is bloody annoying.”

Malfoy grinned. “I know. I go to bed every night confident in the knowledge that I can irk you just by being. But sometimes that gets boring and I feel the need to do some active annoying. Spice up my life. Necessary when you have to attend those damn weekly prefects’ meetings. I’m starting to hate Davies more than you, and that’s a good trick.”

“If you hated me, you wouldn’t be here, Malfoy.”

“Au contraire. Being here means I don’t have to be there.”

“You still haven’t said how--”

Malfoy sighed. “All right. Don’t go thinking I’ve softened, because I haven’t. Like I said; being here means I don’t have to be there.” He looked up and down the corridor. “Do you think we could discuss this someplace that isn’t quite so public?”

Harry moved aside and let Malfoy enter the small room. He lit his wand again and closed the door. Seeing how dim the room was with just the one light, Malfoy took out his wand and lit it too. He looked around, frowning.

“There’s no place to sit.”

“I was sitting on the floor.” Harry did so again. Frowning and grumbling, Malfoy did the same, awkwardly, as though he weren’t used to it. But then he, Harry thought, didn’t grow up in a cupboard under the stairs.

“There are cultures around the world where everyone sits on the floor, Malfoy. Squatting is actually pretty good for you.”

“I’ll leave that to you, Potter. Anyway, the prefects’ meeting. We were just getting started. Davies had called the meeting to order, and then he announced that the first agenda item was a question: Should a person remain a prefect when they have lured someone to a classroom in the middle of the night and attacked that person with Dark Magic?”

“What?” Harry choked out.

“That’s what your girlfriend said. And Spinnet gave him a backhanded slap. On the arm, unfortunately. I can’t get that horse thing out of my mind now...Anyway, she told Davies to shut up, then looked around the room for you. She hadn’t noticed until then that you weren’t there. She said that someone being accused of something had the right to be present to face their accusers. Davies said that you clearly were ducking the meeting because you didn’t want to face your accusers, and I was getting sick of it all, plus I wanted out of the meeting myself, so I volunteered to come find you.”

“You volunteered?”

“Did you miss the part about getting out of the meeting, Potter? Anyway, Granger came after me because she said she knew how to find you, and I’d just be wandering around the castle all night. I personally had no objection to the wandering-around-the-castle thing, but I was wondering how she expected to be able to find you, so I went along with her up to Gryffindor Tower. She made me stand down the corridor while she gave the password--suspicious little thing, isn’t she?--and maybe ten minutes later, she came out and told me to look up here for you. She went back to take notes at the meeting. Afraid that Bulstrode would bollix it up. Which she would, trust me. I merely assumed she or Weasley used that parchment you used before when you told me Filch was in the entrance hall and some other people were in the Trophy Room. Oh, and I never said--thanks for the tip about MacMillan and Abbott in the Trophy Room. I got quite a show, and they were none the wiser...”

“Malfoy!”

“Oh, cut the holier-than-thou crap, Potter. At least I admit to being a voyeur. Who knows what you’ve seen in that Invisibility Cloak of yours. Wish I had one. Have to do something to liven up my boring existence. Anyway, Granger was right. Here you are, hiding out like a bunny and twice as ugly. No, wait; that’s an insult to bunnies everywhere. Ten times as ugly; no twenty times...”

“I get the picture, Malfoy.”

“Do you? I can say it a few more times if you like.”

“Would you like me to open that trap door and push you in it?” Harry said, gesturing toward the rough wooden door where he’d first seen Fluffy standing. Malfoy frowned, not having noticed it before.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t you remember first year, when Dumbledore said this room was off limits?”

Malfoy looked thoughtful for a moment. “Vaguely. You’re sure it was this room?”

“Yes. Because Ron and Hermione and I came in here.”

Malfoy’s jaw dropped. “What was in here?”

“A three-headed dog named Fluffy. Belonged to Hagrid. He was guarding that trap door. Want to know what’s down there if you go through it?”

“I kind of wanted to know how you got past a three-headed dog, but then again--maybe I don’t.”

“Well, after you go through the trap door, you fall for quite a while, finally landing on a lovely plant called Devil’s Snare...”

“Devil’s Snare! All right, Potter, that’s enough. Are you going to come down to the meeting or not?”

“You’re really all that anxious to go back to the meeting?” Harry checked his watch. “There’s still more than half-an-hour to go.”

Malfoy looked like he’d forgotten something. “Oh. That’s right. Avoiding the meeting. Funny, Spinnet looked like she suspected I just wanted to duck out; Granger didn’t seem to get that.”

“She was probably just worried about me. Wanted to know where I was herself.”

Malfoy looked confused now. “And she trusted me to come find you? What if I had put that curse on the Charms doorway? She’d have been leading me right to you.”

“Hermione’s not stupid. She knew you hadn’t done the Charms doorway. And she knows I can handle you when necessary. Care to have the sensation you’re upside-down in the air again?”

Malfoy scowled, gripping his lit wand tightly. “Care to have tentacles growing all over your face?”

Harry smiled. “You know, Malfoy, it’s not so bad hanging out with you sometimes. Especially when the alternative is a prefects’ meeting.”

Malfoy nodded. “I’d take another class with Hagrid’s Blast-Ended Skrewts over a prefects’ meeting.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll tell you a secret; Ron and Hermione and I hated the Skrewts as much as the rest of you.”

“I knew it!”

“Sssshh! Just don’t tell Hagrid. I wouldn’t want to hurt him.”

“What do you see in that overgrown, hairy--”

“Only the most loyal friend I’ve ever had,” Harry said firmly. “He took me away from my horrid aunt and uncle, he told me I’m a wizard, he hand-delivered my Hogwarts letter and he bought me my first-ever birthday present. Do you have a friend who’s done things like that for you? Completely changed your life?”

Malfoy looked down at his hands, silent for once. Then he looked up at Harry, his face strangely exposed in the flickering wandlight.

“Yes.” He said finally. He swallowed and looked down again. “Ginny.”

Harry’s mouth was dry. Malfoy was getting so attached to Ginny. It scared Harry. So much was hanging on their relationship. What if, at some point, she simply decided she was tired of him? What would Malfoy do then? Some people would be suicidal, Harry knew; however, in Malfoy’s case he felt certain that the correct word would be homicidal. And he didn’t think Ginny was the person Malfoy would feel like killing...

Harry checked his watch again after a few minutes of silence between them. “Only about twenty minutes left. We might as well leave here. It’ll take about that long just to get out of this wing and back to the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. And then you have to get all the way down to the dungeons to the Slytherin common room...”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “How do you know where the Slytherin common room is?”

Harry stopped moving abruptly, trying not to give anything away, then deciding that it was long ago, what did it matter? “Well--I’ve been in there.”

“You have? When?”

“Second year.”

“Didn’t anyone notice?”

“No.”

“Were you in that damn Invisibility Cloak?”

“No.”

“Listen Potter, give me something to go on. Okay, *why* were you in the Slytherin common room?”

“I wanted information.”

“What information?”

“I wanted to know whether you were the heir of Slytherin. Turns out you’re not. End of story.”

“End of story? When you can come into my common room any time you want?”

“Did I say that? It was actually quite difficult. Took weeks and weeks of planning, and finally,

Hermione wasn't able to go, just Ron and I."

"Weasley was in there too? Oh, now I will have to make sure we completely decontaminate the place..."

Harry smiled. "Just think. You don't know what has been touched by me or Ron..."

He stood up, enjoying needling Malfoy. Malfoy also stood, in one graceful motion, without help. Harry opened the door and looked up and down the corridor; the torches flickered on the walls and the wind scoured the leaded windows, but no one was in sight. He gestured for Malfoy to follow him and closed the door after he had exited.

They walked to the stairs silently; their feet echoing eerily in the otherwise empty corridor; they passed door after door to rooms they'd never seen, rooms that could hold anything. Harry didn't wonder that even Dumbledore didn't feel that he really knew all of Hogwarts' secrets. Did anyone even know what any of these rooms held, or what they were for? he wondered. It might be useful to start investigating more about the castle, he realized. Especially if there was a Death Eater in Hogwarts other than Malfoy who was using obscure curses to ambush people going in and out of classrooms...

* * * * *

Harry went up to bed as soon as he returned to Gryffindor Tower. When Ron opened his bedcurtains to check on him, he feigned sleep. He heard Ron go to the door of the room, yell down the stairs, "He's in bed! Asleep! Now you go to bed, already! Good night!" Must be Hermione he's bellowing at, Harry thought. She was probably driving Ron starkers obsessing about where he was. Confident he wouldn't be bothered any more, he rolled over and went to sleep.

The next morning, he rose to run as usual, and when Hermione started to ask him about where he was during the meeting, he simply told her he didn't want to talk about it.

"Well, some of us had to sit through a meeting where you were basically tried in absentia! A lot of good Malfoy was; after I told him where to find you, he didn't come back either," she complained. "Luckily, Alicia was able to stop Roger from turning it into a kangaroo court and move us on to other topics."

"Like detentions and house points..."

She flushed while doing her warm-up exercises. "Yes," she admitted reluctantly.

"Hermione, have you ever given someone detention? Or taken away house points? After all, we're allowed to, as prefects."

She frowned. “No. I suppose I’ve seen you and Ron get too many detentions, and felt too awful when I’ve caused points to be taken from Gryffindor to want to do it to someone else. Guess I’m just an old softie.”

Harry grinned at her. “We’ll have to toughen you up before you’re Head Girl. You’ve got two years...”

She smiled with pleasure, looking down. “You really think I’ll be Head Girl?”

He looked at her levelly. “No, I really believe it will be Millicent Bulstrode, Hannah Abbott or Mandy Brocklehurst. Honestly, Hermione! Who else would it be? Look who the other fifth-year girl prefects are!”

“Oh. So you’re saying that of *course* I’ll be Head Girl because they’re all so lame...”

Harry closed his eyes in frustration. “No, no, that’s not what I meant at all...”

Hermione smiled sunnily at him and stood. “Got your mind off your other troubles, didn’t I? Ready to go?”

Harry shook his head at her. “You’re very sneaky, you know that, Hermione Granger?”

“I’m sneaky? You should talk, Mr. Going-Off-With-McGonagall-To---”

“Sssshhh! Come on, someone could come down any second!”

She kissed him on the cheek, then opened the portrait. “I’ll be good. I promise.” She climbed out, while Harry shook his head again, laughing.

After he showered, he started going back down to the Great Hall for breakfast, but his feet were somehow taking him to the hospital wing. He realized that he hadn’t gone there yet to find out how Cho was. Would that make it seem like he was guilty or innocent? he wondered. No. Stop. It doesn’t matter what others think. It’s the right thing to do, to check up on her and see how she is, and Flitwick. It’s my fault they’re both there, he thought.

When he reached the door to the infirmary, he hesitated for a moment before turning the knob. His hand was shaking. Finally, he grasped and turned it, opening it slowly. He saw a hulking dark shape on the far side of the ward, sitting in a chair next to one of the beds.

It was Viktor Krum.

Harry backed up and peeked through the crack between door and jamb. Viktor! What was he doing here? Harry wondered.

Viktor held Cho’s hand as she lay back in the bed, oblivious, her skin very pale. Her lashes

were very dark on her cheeks; her hair fell back from her brow, and Viktor stroked it with one hand, still holding her other hand. He spoke tenderly to her; Harry assumed it was Bulgarian. It sounded quite mellifluous, not as Harry had imagined Bulgarian at all. It rolled out of Viktor smoothly and fell on Harry's ear not unlike the Welsh he'd heard his mother singing. Of course, he knew, many people thought Welsh an awkward language.

Harry stared in wonder at Krum gazing at Cho. Flitwick lay in another bed, his little feet clearly only reaching about half-way down the mattress, judging from the small shapes under the blanket covering him. Harry had never seen him like this, in repose. His face was usually so animated, he always seemed to be smiling. He had such *fun* teaching! He never seemed to be not having the time of his life.

Now Krum stood, leaned over Cho and kissed her on the forehead. Harry had never felt guiltier in his life, not even when he saw Cedric's body. He was responsible for putting Krum together with Cho, and for her being targeted, and for Flitwick getting caught in the crossfire. All of it was his fault and he just wanted to have the earth open up and swallow him, he felt so awful.

How could he have thought Viktor Krum was Voldemort's heir? He remembered how Krum had talked to him about Hermione the previous year; how concerned he was about whether there was something between them, because Hermione talked about him all the time. Well, thought Harry, he certainly seemed to be over Hermione. That's a relief. One good thing about all this...

But then Viktor was walking toward the infirmary door. Harry closed it quietly and dashed down the corridor, hiding behind a suit of armor, hoping Viktor would be going down the stairs several yards before the armor. He did, and Harry waited until his footsteps had receded before emerging from his hiding place, breathing a sigh of relief. He looked down the corridor at the infirmary door. Somehow, he felt like he would be some kind of intruder, going in there now. Viktor really seemed to care about her. He must have heard about what had happened and had come here to see her. It was quite touching, really, even if they had found each other by being manipulated by Harry and Hermione.

He went down to breakfast, finding Hedwig waiting for him on Ron's shoulder.

"Where've you been?" Ron wanted to know.

"The hospital wing."

"You okay?"

"Not for me. I was visiting. At least, I was going to..." as he spoke, he took the parchment from Hedwig and gave her some bacon before she flew off to the Owlery. "But Viktor Krum was there, so I didn't go in."

"Viktor!" Hermione said with surprise. Ron looked equally surprised. Harry lowered his voice.

“Told you the plan worked, didn’t I? They must have gotten even closer after we left the Three Broomsticks with the elves. He was up there sitting by her bedside, talking to her in Bulgarian. He kissed her before he left.”

“He kissed her!” Hermione was indignant.

“On the forehead.”

“Hermione,” Ron hissed at her. “What are you getting upset for? You wanted to be rid of him!”

“Yes, but he was supposed to break up with me, not cheat on me! Technically this still makes me his girlfriend, and now if anyone finds out he’s visiting her and kissing her in her coma, I look like a stupid little prat, ignorant of what he’s doing behind my back...”

“Who cares?” Ron insisted. “If *you* broke up with *him* now, he probably wouldn’t stalk you or anything, right? He’s moved on.” Hermione grimaced at Ron, unwilling to admit he was right. Harry thought she might be thinking about the Rita Skeeter article from Witch Weekly that had run during the Triwizard Tournament, depicting her as some sort of “scarlet woman” (Ron’s words) toying with the affections of both Krum and Harry. The worst thing about the article (even worse than the howlers she received in the owl post) was that Snape read it aloud in class, causing the Slytherins to roar and Hermione to turn beet red and look like she wanted to crawl into her cauldron and liquefy, becoming part of her potion. Somehow, Harry didn’t think Snape would refrain from doing it again, even though he and Harry had developed a new kind of relationship. He still seemed determined to show nothing but contempt and severity to any students not in Slytherin, especially when other Slytherins were around.

“I don’t want my private life to wind up in the press again,” she mumbled, eating her porridge. Harry took a bite of toast and unrolled the letter Hedwig had delivered to him. Maybe he could change the subject. He hadn’t expected Hermione to react this way; much of the time, she didn’t seem to care what other people thought.

“It’s from Dudley,” he told Ron and Hermione, relieved that it would be something unrelated to the wizarding world, to take his mind off his troubles. It was written on lined paper clearly torn from one of Dudley’s notebooks.

“Dear Harry,

“It’s been a while since you wrote. I had this letter ready for you for the last week! Next time, write sooner, okay?”

“--Dudley”

Harry set that piece of paper aside, feeling vaguely guilty for having neglected writing Dudley for so long; he could only write back when Hedwig showed up, after all. He’d finally written an

innocuous letter about being captain of the dueling club. Harry read the letter now that Dudley had been waiting to send.

“Dear Harry,

“Have you heard about the Westminster tube station? I wasn’t sure if that kind of news would get to you where you are. Bloody disaster! Completely blown up! I say either IRA or Pakistanis. Or maybe someone else. I don’t actually know. Could be those crazies who were sending tear gas into the Tokyo subways, who knows? Maybe they’re just going to target underground trains around the world!

“Anyway, the really weird thing is that the word POTTER was on the wall in the station, in green, just like your eyes! How weird is that? Did I already say it was weird? Okay, but you have to admit, it really is! I wonder why someone put POTTER on the wall like that? Probably every person in England named Potter is wondering, too.

“Anyhow, we’ve given up on mice in biology class and we’re using rats in the mazes now. Bigger brains. We all have these white rats with pink eyes and ears and tails. I think they’re albinos. My roommate and I keep ours in the same cage in our room. I think his is pregnant and mine did the deed with her. Does that mean I’ll be a grandpa? Ha ha!

“That Sneakoscope thing has been quiet lately, so either it’s broken or my roommate isn’t stealing from me. Could be some other prat, I suppose. I’m trying to get up the nerve to ask Julia out for Valentine’s Day. I’ve lost forty-five pounds since school started! I think she’s noticed. I hope so. Wish me luck!

“Dudley”

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione. He really did not need to be reminded of Westminster. He thought about it all the time. They looked pityingly at him, not saying anything.

They finished breakfast and went to class. Each class blurred into the next for Harry; the week passed almost without his noticing, and Sunday rolled around again, with Dueling Club. There were four more new people: Neville, Parvati and Padma Patil and Susan Bones, from Hufflepuff.

Both Harry and Hermione dueled against Parvati, Padma and Susan, winning against all three of them. Of the new people, Ginny only dueled Neville and Padma, winning both duels. Ron and Malfoy only beat Padma and Susan; when each of them was dueling Parvati, they looked somewhat distracted by her. Malfoy seemed to be swallowing a lot and moving somewhat slowly. Ron appeared to be looking straight into her eyes as if mesmerized, and when his wand went flying out of his hand and he was hurled backward, it was as though he were expecting it, even waiting anxiously for it. After the vote went to Parvati, Ron and Parvati retreated to the circle perimeter again, smiling at each other, speaking in low tones. Harry saw Parvati cover her mouth, as though Ron had said something that made her laugh. Then he saw Hermione’s face;

she was watching Ron and Parvati too, frowning. Hermione had not voted for Parvati, despite the fact that she had disarmed Ron.

When he was dueling Neville, on the other hand, Ron did not seem to expect he would lose. He was quite nonchalant about his attack, and when Neville dodged his disarming charm and sent the same back at Ron, Ron knocked over a half-dozen club members and staggered to his feet, looking dazed, staring at Neville as though he'd never seen him before. Neville smiled at him, but Ron was definitely not smiling back.

At the end of the club meeting, Neville and Parvati had done the best of the new members, with only four losses each. Harry smiled at Neville and waved as he and Ron and Hermione left the Great Hall; dinner would not start for almost two hours, so they had planned to visit Hagrid. Ron looked back at Parvati with her sister Padma; suddenly, they didn't seem so identical, Harry thought.

He and Ron and Hermione were in the entrance hall, putting on the cloaks they'd brought with them, when Neville ran out of the Great Hall and called to Ginny. She stopped; she had been about to climb the marble stairs.

"Ginny!" he said again. "Would you--would you like to go for a walk before dinner?" She looked dumbfounded. Harry saw Malfoy standing at the head of the stairs leading down to the dungeons. Ginny turned her head in his direction for a moment, then back to Neville, looking confused.

"Oh, um, all right," she stammered. "But I don't have my cloak..."

"Neither do I. Let's go get them, and then we can have a short walk..."

Ginny nodded, following him up the steps. She looked over her shoulder at Malfoy for a moment, raising her eyebrows in a helpless way. Malfoy scowled, then descended the stairs. Ron was watching Ginny and Neville disappear up the stairs, also frowning. He didn't appear to have taken any notice of Malfoy. Hermione hit Ron on the arm playfully.

"She's almost fifteen, you know," she reminded him. "And Neville's harmless. He spent the entire Yule Ball stepping on her feet. You didn't object to her going out with him then..."

"That was different. The whole school was there." He was still frowning. Harry and Hermione hustled him out the front door and into the snow, laughing.

"Let's see, will you let her start dating when she's--twenty?" Hermione made a snowball quickly and tossed it at Ron. He didn't duck in time, getting an ear full of frosty coldness.

"Hey!" Ron complained.

"Twenty-five?" suggested Harry, throwing his own snowball that hit Ron in the arm.

“Thirty?”

“Forty?”

With each suggestion, Harry and Hermione threw a snowball at Ron, laughing. He had started fighting back, and the three of them were soon exchanging fire randomly, Harry aiming at each of them, Hermione taking turns throwing at Harry and Ron, Ron fighting back against the two of them. They somehow managed to get down to Hagrid’s cabin in the midst of the traveling snowball fight, laughing uproariously the whole time. (By the time they reached the cabin, Ginny’s potential dating age had become three-hundred and seventy.)

Hagrid was glad to see them. Harry was last to enter the cabin, following Ron and Hermione. Before he did so, he felt the urge to turn around.

Ginny and Neville were walking together by the edge of the lake, not touching. He could see their lips moving, their breaths were white smoky clouds punctuating the dusk. He found himself focusing on Ginny in particular, the way her hair spilled over her collar, the gold and red looking russet and chestnut in the dim light, her pale face inscrutable at a distance. Neville was a few inches taller than her—taller than me now, Harry realized, since he and Ginny were the same height. Ginny stumbled momentarily; her boot went deeper into a drift than she expected, it seemed, and Neville put his hand on her arm, helping her, and after that they walked with her arm linked in his.

“Harry!” Hagrid called to him from the fire. “Close the bloody door!” Harry reluctantly did so, watching Neville and Ginny walk arm in arm around the lake through a slowly shrinking opening, until he had finally closed it all the way. But as he sat in Hagrid’s cabin, drinking tea, listening to the others discuss the dueling, he still saw them in his mind’s eye, strolling through the snowy twilight.

* * * * *

There were still no Charms classes during the next day. There was a rumor going around that Dumbledore had hired a substitute, but he wouldn’t be able to start until March. Hermione fretted, spending the Charms time in the library, studying. “We still have the O.W.L.s to think about, remember?” she prodded Harry and Ron. Ron rolled his eyes.

“You don’t even appreciate having a free period...”

“No, what I don’t appreciate--and I’ll bet he doesn’t either--is poor Professor Flitwick being in a coma.”

She looked at Harry grimly; they still had no idea who had sent those notes, and Dumbledore himself was stymied about the doorway to the Charms classroom, which was still sealed off to

prevent anyone else becoming comatose. They had also had no luck finding a way to communicate with Malfoy that didn't risk discovery by the other Death Eater. Harry had asked Snape to pair him up with Malfoy in Potions, and he had done so (in a humiliating incident involving ground newts and a reducing potion gone wrong). But Malfoy didn't know anything new, so it wasn't much help.

After classes were done for the day, they went back up to the common room. Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting by the fire, reading history and trying to stay awake (or at least Ron and Harry were struggling to stay awake) when they heard Parvati squeal excitedly from across the room.

"Oh! Lavender! It's beautiful!" She was holding up a delicate-looking violet sweater with pearlized buttons down the front.

"Happy birthday!" Lavender said to her, grinning. Ron frowned, stood up and walked over to them.

"Birthday? I thought I heard you saying 'Happy Birthday' to your sister yesterday."

Parvati looked at him levelly. "Yes. Yesterday was her birthday. And today is mine. She was born just before midnight, I was born just after. Which even makes us different signs; she's Aquarius and I'm Pisces." Harry thought to himself, That makes sense. It partly explained why they were in different houses.

Ron was looking at her strangely. Parvati went right on looking back. Even Lavender seemed discomfited by this. "Why don't you try your sweater on?" she asked Parvati, who finally turned to her friend.

"Yes, I will. Excuse me," she said to Lavender and Ron, walking toward the girls' stairs carrying her present. When she returned, she was wearing some jeans and the sweater, which turned out to be rather low-cut. The color went perfectly with her skin and hair; Harry could see that Lavender had chosen wisely. He could also see that Ron was looking flushed and that Hermione had noticed.

Ron swallowed, staring at her. "It looks--really nice," he said lamely.

Parvati didn't seem inclined to pass judgment on his lack of originality. "Thanks. Thank you again, Lavender," she said suddenly, as though remembering it was her friend who had given it to her and not Ron. If Malfoy saw her in that sweater, Harry thought, he'd *really* want to have use of Moody's magical eye.

"Do you--do you want to play chess?" Ron asked her awkwardly. She smiled at him like she had a secret, agreeing.

Harry and Hermione sat near the fireplace until dinner, ostensibly continuing to read, but

Hermione was really watching Ron and Parvati out of the corner of her eye, and Harry could also not resist stealing glances at them. Was Ron just trying to get a rise out of Hermione? he wondered. Then again, he genuinely seemed like he might be attracted to Parvati. Seamus, Dean, Lee and Fred had noticed her new sweater the moment they had come into the common room, all of them goggling at her, and Lee had had to push Fred up the stairs to the dorms, he was staring at her so hard, a lump in his throat.

During the week, Harry noticed that where Ron usually sat near Harry and Hermione in classes and Parvati sat near Lavender, Lavender was more often on her own while Ron and Parvati sat together. When Argent began mewling softly in Binns' class, Parvati took the kitten from him surreptitiously, holding her under the desk, stroking her with her finger softly, while Ron tried to look back at Binns innocently and answer questions about Boris the Bewildered. Hermione started to get quite snippy with Ron, until she hardly spoke to him at all when it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Sunday rolled around again very quickly, it seemed to Harry, and the last screening day for the Dueling Club had arrived. After this, the membership would be set, and they would be spending more time learning defenses and countercurses and dodging techniques, eventually learning to duel in larger numbers than one-on-one. Snape told them they would do even matches of two-on-two and three-on-three, but eventually they would also do uneven matches of two-on-one, three-on-two and even three-on-one.

As they prepared to start, Harry noticed that Niamh and Liam's little sister Orla was sitting on one of the tables that had been pushed to the wall. Justin sat next to her, watching. Harry wondered whether they should be present; Liam was ranked pretty low, and could very well be eliminated in this meeting. Would he want Justin and Orla watching his humiliation, if that's what happened? Or were they there to encourage him? Harry put it out of his mind. The only person he still had to duel was Neville; otherwise, all he would be doing was voting on other duels, so he was mostly going to be a spectator too, during this meeting.

Neville, Padma, Parvati and Susan were still being vetted. Neville dueled Parvati first, disarming her quickly. She looked surprised, then returned to the circle, standing next to Ron. It was certainly becoming more and more difficult to find one without the other. They stood very close together, it seemed, and looked at each other quite a lot, Harry thought.

The next time Neville dueled, he beat Crabbe. He had a triumphant gleam in his eye as he saw the wands go up for him, and Harry couldn't help feeling that Neville was starting to come into his own. He tried to put out of his mind the walk around the lake with Ginny. She had just been polite, saying yes, since she supposedly wasn't seeing anyone. If she had said she was seeing someone, people would be interested to know who it was.

When Ginny defeated Parvati, Ron surprised Harry by voting against his sister. It was the first time he had not voted for her. Parvati beamed back at him. But Ginny had won cleanly, and received the most votes. She also defeated Susan, a little later, although Susan then turned around and bested Evan Davies (Harry thought Evan might have a little crush on Susan).

Harry saw Justin and Orla wincing when Parvati beat Liam. Soon after, it was Hermione's turn to duel Neville. She smiled at him before they bowed; Neville did not smile however. Harry watched through narrowed eyes. Something about Neville seemed different somehow. He realized he hadn't seen him much during the previous week. Had he been spending much time practicing?

He pointed his wand at Hermione, crying, "Egami rorrim!" Hermione looked down at herself in confusion, then shrugged; the spell didn't seem to have had any effect on her. Harry had never heard of it before, and had no idea what it was supposed to do. He assumed Neville had muffed it.

But when he shifted to Hermione's left, Hermione turned and looked as though she were pursuing an attacker on her right. She pointed her wand, but it was at the spectators; Roger and Evan Davies and Malfoy were potentially in her sights, and they started moving out of the way cautiously.

"Expelliarmus!" she cried, the sparks shooting out of her wand harmlessly, as she wasn't even facing Neville and Malfoy and the Davies brothers had dodged out of the way. She made a face; what did she think she was doing? Harry wondered. Perhaps Neville's spell had worked after all. Neville smiled now.

"Impedimenta!" he said, then walked over to her and plucked the wand from her hand. He received a unanimous vote. After the spell was lifted from her, Hermione returned to the circle, still looking slightly disoriented.

"What was that?" Harry whispered to her. But she put her finger to her lips to silence him. After about five more duels, Neville went again, this time defeating Alicia. Then Parvati bested her twin, who turned around and beat Niamh Quirke a few duels later. After another handful of duels, it was Neville's turn again, this time against Roger Davies. Harry was nervous about Roger; Neville was doing really well, and Roger always took losing very poorly. He very much wanted to see Neville beat Roger, but he was concerned about what lengths Roger would go to win himself.

It wasn't a pretty duel. Neville and Roger had the longest duel yet at about fifteen minutes, using painful Passus Curses on each other and Confundus-class charms. They also made repeated attempts to disarm each other, only to dodge out of the way. Finally, one of Neville's disarming charms landed squarely on Roger, who flew backward into Angelina and George. They helped him up, but he was quite ungracious about it and did not even thank them. Angelina looked like she might put another hex on him, but George put his hand on her wand arm, smiling and shaking his head, silently reminding her what a git Roger was. She smiled back at George and put her wand away.

After several more duels, Neville defeated Parvati, and then Malfoy, who looked as upset as Roger, although they hadn't dueled for as long. That was followed by Padma beating Lee

Jordan, Susan Bones defeating Crabbe, and Parvati losing to Niamh Quirke. It was Neville's turn again. Snape called out the name of his opponent.

“Potter!”

Harry stepped forward. Neville looked at him levelly. Neither of them smiled. Harry felt that other duelers had underestimated Neville. He did not plan to make the same mistake. They bowed to each other, eyes on the floor for only a split second before raising them to look at each other again. They stepped back and held their wands at the ready. Harry looked into Neville's eyes, trying to see the intent there, trying to discern when the moment of action would come. Neville looked right back, revealing nothing.

They circled each other slowly; Harry was dimly aware of the existence of the other people in the circle. They had receded into some kind of middle distance for him, present and yet not. Harry watched Neville's mouth, too, and his throat, trying to determine the second that he started to utter an incantation of any kind.

Harry saw it then, and a moment later it had happened; Neville said, “Expelliarmus!” and pointed his wand at Harry, but Harry was ready and had already dodged the sparks from the wand, immediately aiming his wand at Neville.

“Locomotor mortis!” he cried, and he could see that the leg-locker curse had hit Neville squarely. Neville was locked in place now, but looking no less determined. He produced a series of blue-bell flames that danced around Harry.

“Fluvius!” Harry cried, aiming the stream of water coming from his wand at the flames, putting them out, then having a thought, and aiming the stream of water at Neville. Neville rocked back slightly, then pointed his wand at the arc of water.

“Frigidarium!” he said, and the arc of water became an arc of ice, frozen in midair for a moment, before it broke free of Harry's wand and fell to the stone floor with a deafening CRASH! as though every delicate piece in a crystal shop had been shattered. Harry held onto his wand firmly, shocked by the noise, while he was vaguely aware that Neville had taken the leg-locker curse off himself.

Neville aimed his wand at him again. “Bracchio suo passus est!” Harry gritted his teeth, feeling the pain in his arm for a second only, before his mind floated free, knowing that it wasn't real, physical pain, but a mere trick. He willed himself to return to his senses and aimed his wand at Neville.

“Reverso!”

But Neville merely smiled. Why is he smiling? Harry wondered. Neville pointed his wand right at him, not appearing to be affected by the charm.

“Inverso!”

Damn! Harry thought, as the world seemed to turn over. He looked between his feet; there was the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. He looked up; there was Neville, and, appearing to be in a circle floating upside down, the spectators staring at him. He thought it looked like Orla Quirke and Justin Finch Fletchley ran out of the Hall, but it was difficult to tell. He closed his eyes to get his bearings. I know which way is up, he told himself. I know which way is up.

He pointed his wand at himself, at his glasses, saying, “Impervius!” Then he pointed his wand above his head, not trying to aim at Neville now, saying, “Pluvius!” this time. Immediately, rain began to pour from the enchanted ceiling, soaking Harry and Neville and sending the spectators running into the entrance hall, except for Snape, who hovered nearby, rain running down his face and hair and robes. Harry smiled, then took the Inverso charm off himself. He felt like he was standing on solid ground again, although he was also being pelted with rain, facing an equally soaking-wet Neville. Neville stared back at him. They circled each other, water streaming down their faces. Harry’s glasses repelled the water.

Harry could tell Neville was tired of being wet. Finally Neville gave in and pointed upward, saying, “Dessicatio!” The rain immediately stopped and they were both dry again. But while Neville had been preoccupied with that, Harry had taken the opportunity to attack him again.

“Mano suo passus est!” he cried, pointing at Neville’s wand hand. Neville made a pained face and moved his left hand to grasp his right, so that he wouldn’t drop his wand. Even in the midst of his pain, he pointed his wand at Harry, holding onto it with both hands to steady it. After the rain had stopped, the other club members had come back into the Great Hall, and with them, it seemed the rest of the school, students and teachers. Had Orla and Justin gone to get them?

“Tracheo suo passus est!” Neville cried, pointing his wand. Harry’s neck seized up, and he clutched at his throat with his left hand, dropping to his knees, resisting the urge to release his wand so he could put both his hands around his throat. He closed his eyes and moved out of himself again, moving past the pain, past the illusion.

He quickly pointed his wand at Neville again, crying, “Expelliarmus!” wanting the fight to be over finally, but Neville dodged it nimbly, pointing his wand at Harry and sending another passus curse his way, aimed at his left leg. Harry sidestepped it, and they spent a while then, it seemed, hurling curses and Confundus charms and hexes at each other and dodging them.

Harry wasn’t sure how long they’d been dueling. He was vaguely aware of Hermione watching with her fist in her mouth, Snape pacing back and forth, frowning, the crowd of students beyond the circle standing on tables and chairs to see, the hubbub in the hall growing to a deafening pitch.

Finally, Neville did the same thing he’d done to Hermione; he aimed at Harry and said, “Emagi rorrim!” Harry frowned. He didn’t feel any different. Wait--he looked down. His wand was in his left hand now. How had that happened? He looked up; he had though he was facing the east

wall of the hall, with the doorway leading to the entrance hall to his right, but now the doorway was on his left. What had Neville done? He didn't feel particularly disoriented, yet he didn't feel right either, and he knew he hadn't taken his wand from his right hand and put it in his left.

Trying to ignore how unnatural his wand felt, he aimed another disarming charm at Neville, who was standing to his left. Neville seemed to absorb the charm with no effect; he was not flying backwards, his wand was not zooming into Harry's hand. What had gone wrong?

Neville pointed his wand, but it looked to Harry like he was pointing it at Snape for some reason. "Petrificus Totalus!" he cried, and Harry blanched; he was putting a full-body bind on Snape!

But then Harry felt all of his joints stiffen and it was a great effort not to fall over. He couldn't move; HE was the one in the full body bind. But Neville wasn't pointing at me, he reasoned in his head, watching Neville move toward him and triumphantly pluck his wand from his hand, holding it over his head.

The duel was over. Harry was disarmed.

Snape took the spells off Harry and Neville returned his wand to him. The hall was utterly quiet.

"Vote!" Snape cried. "For Longbottom..." One by one, then in waves, the club members raised their wands for Neville, until every last one of them held his or her wand in the air. Snape stared around at the circle twice, three times, checking to be sure, before saying loudly, his voice ringing through the packed hall, "It is unanimous! Eighteen votes--"

"Nineteen," Harry said loudly and clearly, raising his own wand now, looking at Snape, and then Neville, starting to smile. Snape gave a very slight nod of the head, preparing to amend his words.

"Nineteen votes for Longbottom!" he decreed, the last syllable of Neville's last name suddenly lost in the roar of acclamation that emanated from the gathered students and teachers as everyone let their feelings be known. The sound bounced around the hard stone walls and floors, threatening to reach a deafening pitch, and in the midst of it, Harry put his wand in his robes and stepped toward Neville, his right hand extended. Neville paused for only a second, also pocketing his wand and taking Harry's hand, shaking it.

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said with a smile, leaning in towards him so he could be heard.

Neville smiled back now. "Any time, Harry. Any time." He slapped Harry on the back and they walked toward Ron and Hermione, who were going as wild as anyone else. Hermione, hugged Neville and Harry, and Ron clapped them both on the shoulder, shaking his head and grinning. Harry's head was starting to hurt from the noise in the Great Hall, but he was getting the impression that it wasn't going to die down for quite a while. Harry had a feeling that Neville would remember this day for the rest of his life, and Harry knew that he would too.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Four Awakenings

The next day, the Dueling Club standings were posted. Harry and Hermione paused for a while, perusing them before going into the Great Hall to run.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Duelling Club Standings

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. Name Potter, Harry [captain] Granger, Hermione Weasley, Virginia Weasley, Alfred Longbottom, Neville Davies, Evan Malfoy, Draco Spinnet, Alicia Davies, Roger Bones, Susan Jordan, Lee Quirke, Niamh Johnson, Angelina Weasley, George Patil, Parvati Weasley, Ronald Wins 18 17 17 15 14 12 11 11 11 11 8 7 6 6 6 6 Losses 1 2 2 4 5 7 8 8 8 11 12 13 13 13 13 13

“Who’s Alfred Weasley?” Harry asked her, perplexed.

“Fred.”

“Fred is short for Alfred?” Harry made a face.

“Well, I suppose it could have been short for Frederick. But it’s not. You understand who Virginia is, I hope?”

“Of course...”

“--or did you think ‘Ginny’ was short for ‘Gingivitis?’”

Harry glowered at her. She laughed.

“Sorry. Dentist humor. My background creeping through.” Then they both laughed together and went into the Great Hall to run.

Harry, Hermione and Ginny had each lost to Neville, but he’d lost to some people in his first week, so their standings were unaffected. And after this, they would all be learning together. Harry had looked forward to talking to Neville about the dueling, but Neville hadn’t wanted to stay after the meeting was over. He said he needed to work on Potions before dinner. Ginny looked irked; Harry thought she might have been planning to go down to the dungeon with Malfoy, and now Neville would be there.

Neville was definitely doing better in Potions--perhaps from all that extra time he was putting in, Harry thought. Harry had also put in some extra work, and was hopeful that he'd get O.W.L.s in basic and intermediate potions both. Snape still seemed to go out of his way to humiliate him in class, but the grades he was getting on paper were quite respectable.

Later that morning, just before dismissing the Potions class, Snape stood at the front of the room and announced, "For those of you in Gryffindor, the headmaster wishes you to know that you should report to the Great Hall for Charms class next period. Evidently, the substitute professor has decided to grace us with his presence early. And Slytherins should report to the Great Hall for Charms at your usual time, directly after luncheon."

Harry's heart sank; great, no free period. And it was someone Snape didn't like, evidently, based on the sneer on his pale face. When Harry was younger, that would have made him pretty happy and optimistic. Now, however, he was actually getting along with Snape and trusting him. Harry also realized, quite suddenly, that Snape hadn't liked or trusted Quirrell, and he was right--Quirrell had been trying to kill Harry. Then there was Lockhart-- tremendous waste of space, thought Harry. Huge fraud. And another person Snape hadn't liked. Of course, Snape hadn't liked or trusted Sirius or Lupin, but after what Harry had seen in the Pensieve, he wasn't too surprised. (Snape seemed to be moving past that now.) Then, during the previous year, Snape hadn't liked Crouch because he thought he was Moody, and Crouch hadn't like him because Snape had become a spy, and he knew it.

In a way, Snape had a pretty good track record for judging who to trust and who not. Harry could imagine the new professor being quite like Lockhart. "Grace us with his presence," didn't exactly sound like a ringing endorsement. How odd to be looking to Snape, wanting to know what he thought about things, what he thought of people. Harry would never have guessed it, a year earlier.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and the other Gryffindors ascended the stairs to the entrance hall with trepidation, unsure of what to expect from this substitute, who could be the person responsible for preparing them to be tested on Charms for their O.W.L.s, if Flitwick didn't awake soon. If Snape didn't like him...

But when he entered the Great Hall and saw who the teacher was, Harry was shocked. Dumbledore! No, wait, he thought; that's not Dumbledore...

The fifth-year Gryffindors entered the hall cautiously, eyeing their new instructor suspiciously. He looked like Dumbledore and yet not. He was just as tall and had the same twinkling blue eyes, even the same style of half-moon spectacles; he had the same silver-white hair, but when he turned, Harry noticed that it was only shoulder-length, not cascading down his back, like Dumbledore. He had the same kindly face, marked with deep smile-lines around the mouth and eyes, but his skin was darker, more leathery, as though he spent a great deal of time in the sun. The lower part of his face was hidden by a close-cut white beard and mustache. He wore a tall purple wizard's hat with silver and gold moons and stars embroidered on it, which matched his robes. He held his wand loosely, as though he didn't particularly care where he waved it. At the

moment he was using it as some sort of conductor's baton, directing them into the hall, pointing out where he wanted them to be. Silver sparks flew out of the tip as he did this.

"All right, class. Am I correct in assuming that you are the fifth-year Gryffindors?"

They nodded. Harry looked down at his silver prefect's badge, and at Hermione. As the prefects, should they be taking more of a lead? But he felt as unsure and dumbfounded as the others, confronted by this Dumbledore-yet-not-Dumbledore.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aberforth Dumbledore. Yes, the headmaster is my brother. Now, some of you may have heard that I was in a spot of trouble some years ago for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat..."

Seamus and Dean could not prevent themselves from sniggering, trying to cover it up with their hands, but unable to stop. Ron's eyes were bulging and his mouth was clamped tightly shut; Harry thought he would lose it in a minute, the thought of which was starting to make it difficult for Harry not to burst out laughing. He caught Hermione's eye, though, and her stern look was enough to calm him again. He determined that he should not look at Parvati or Lavender, whom he could hear tittering behind him. Neville was the only other person besides Hermione seemingly unaffected by the goat remark.

"Yes, well," he said, then cleared his throat, clearly aware of the effort some of them were having to expend in not laughing. "All charges were dropped, although it did keep the Daily Prophet gossip mill spinning for some time. And I still maintain that 'inappropriate' is in the eye of the beholder..."

Ron lost it now, laughing openly. Hermione glared at him. He clapped his hand over his mouth, a horrified look on his face. But then Harry saw that Aberforth Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling. Finally, he smiled.

"Just my way of breaking the ice. I'm not really a teacher, per se. I do specialize in Charms, of course. Or rather, a cross between Charms and Herbology and Animal Husbandry. But what you need for now is a Charms teacher, so I'm here as a favor to my brother. Now, as you probably already call him Professor Dumbledore, calling me Professor Dumbledore as well would probably make everyone's lives needlessly confusing, yes? Therefore I have received permission from my brother to tell you that you may call me Aberforth. You do not need to call me 'Professor' Aberforth, after all, I'm not one, really, and this position is strictly temporary." He put his wand away and clapped his hands together, smiling in anticipation. "Now! Why don't you introduce yourselves to me and tell me what you know about Confundus-class charms."

Harry was relieved that when he told Aberforth who he was, he didn't make a big deal out of his scar and the whole Voldemort thing. Instead, he noted that Harry was captain of the Dueling Club, according to the parchment in the entrance hall. Harry proceeded to have the most fun he'd ever had in Charms--and that was saying something, because Harry had always enjoyed

Flitwick's classes. Aberforth would put the charms on them and then show them how to see past the confusion so that they could still function effectively. It was a little like Defense Against the Dark Arts, without the pain. Harry realized that Neville had already started learning this; that was why the Reverso charm hadn't seemed to have any affect on him when they duelled. But the end of class, Harry could function completely normally under the Inverso charm; even while having the sensation of hanging upside-down in the air, he could accurately point his wand at a target (after about thirty tries).

They stayed in the hall after class, since it was time for lunch. The fifth-year Gryffindors were already sitting at their house table, excitedly discussing the Charms class, when the rest of the students started pouring in. Harry looked up at the staff table. Dumbledore was smiling at his brother and beckoning him to sit next to him. Harry looked at the two men, so alike and yet with subtle differences.

Dumbledore always seemed to be hiding--something. Harry would ask him questions, and he'd give answers, but they never seemed to be quite complete. Or he'd ask a question to which Dumbledore simply didn't want to give an answer, and Harry had to be content with that (although he usually wasn't).

Aberforth, on the other hand, seemed completely open and straightforward, nothing hidden. The chief characteristic they shared, Harry felt, besides their looks, was their sense of humor. Perhaps that was why Snape disliked him, Harry thought. A sense of humor wasn't high on Snape's list of priorities.

When there were only about ten minutes left before afternoon classes would start, Will Flitwick came hurtling into the hall and ran to the Gryffindor table. There was a space open next to Harry, and Will slipped into it, banging his rucksack down and reaching for a roll before he was even sitting. He bumped into Harry as he positioned himself, mumbling something that might have been, "Sorry," through the bite of bread he was already chewing.

"S'okay," Harry said, trying not to laugh at him. His normally pale cheeks (puffed out with food now) were quite pink; he pushed his gold curls off his sweaty forehead and reached for a chicken leg to put on his plate, taking a large bite out of it first.

"Where've you been?" Harry asked him, smiling. Will tried to speed up his chewing so he wouldn't have to answer with his mouth full. After what looked to Harry like a rather painful swallowing process, Will was ready to speak.

"Hospital wing. Visiting my uncle." He said this with not a trace of recognition that the vast majority of people in the school were blaming Harry for Flitwick being in a coma. Harry swallowed and looked down at his empty plate.

"Sorry, Will," he mumbled. Will swallowed another larger piece of chicken after chewing it only briefly.

“What’re you sorry for, Harry? You didn’t do anything.”

Harry jerked his head up, staring at the eleven-year-old boy who had stated this as unequivocally as if he’d been saying the sky was blue and Snitches were gold. Then he realized that everyone else at the Gryffindor table was staring, too. Will looked back at them all, a strange maturity, Harry thought, in the way he met the eyes of every person there.

“Well, you all know that, don’t you? You don’t honestly think Harry could have done anything to hurt my uncle, or Cho Chang?”

Harry waited for the affirmations to come; but Ron’s and Hermione’s voices were feeble and too late; they knew, of course, but to say how they knew would be to tell far too much.

Now Will was standing glaring at them all, his blue eyes frowning stormily. “Is that what you think? Is that what you all think?” His voice had risen, the high-pitched, young timbre cutting through the murmur of luncheon conversation, which ground to an abrupt halt. “Is that what everyone thinks?” he said, looking around the hall, his voice carrying to the farthest corners. “You all think Harry Potter hurt my uncle?” Silence greeted him, as even people Harry knew didn’t believe this didn’t dare to speak.

Will’s voice grew louder. “Whoever did this to my uncle was a coward. Harry Potter is not a coward! Most of you watched him lose a duel here yesterday. Did he hide afterward? No! He voted for his opponent along with everyone else! He dueled with You-Know-Who! He won the Triwizard Tournament! He deserves the respect of everyone here, of everyone in the wizarding world! Harry Potter has not done anything wrong!”

The echo of his treble voice took half a minute to die away. Harry looked at the other Gryffindors. After what seemed like a long minute of silence, Alicia stood; she nodded, and the others at the table, first through seventh years, also rose. She said softly, “Go on then, Harry. We’re all behind you.” He stood also, striding toward the door, flanked by Hermione and Will on his right, Ron and Parvati on his left, the rest of the Gryffindors walking in his wake.

The other houses watched this show of Gryffindor solidarity in silence. Once they were in the entrance hall, his housemates fell on him, some hugging him, others pumping his hand or slapping him on the back. Harry almost felt like crying; for two weeks he’d been living under a cloud, and now this outpouring of support was almost unbearably touching. This is what houses are *for*, he thought.

He smiled at the other Gryffindors, waving to the ones moving off to go to their afternoon classes. He saw Ginny look over her shoulder at him. He frowned; her expression was hard to read. He realized she had not joined in the hugging or back-slapping. She had kept her distance from him. She did believe he was innocent, didn’t she? Could she have traveled out of the Great Hall in the pack with the other Gryffindors just to avoid calling attention to herself? Harry swallowed, watching her go, wishing her opinion did not mean so much to him. But that was something he could not help.

* * * * *

On Thursday, Ron asked Neville to stay in the Divination classroom for a few minutes after class so he could try doing another Tarot reading for him.

“I need the practice,” he said. “You know, for the O.W.L.s.”

Neville looked skeptical. Since when had Ron cared about O.W.L.s? his expression seemed to say. Ron went to the shelves near the fireplace and took down a Tarot deck; they were still trying to plumb the mysterious depths of Augury, still staring listlessly at the insides of dead birds. The Tarot cards hadn't been used in a while.

As Harry was leaving, he heard Ron ask Neville, “All right. When's your birthday again?” Harry could tell Ron was trying not to smile. Neville looked unsurprised that Ron did not remember his birthday.

“Today. Um, February twenty-ninth, that is,” he stuttered.

“Today? You don't say. Happy birthday, Neville. Right then. We'll just do you a birthday reading...”

Harry smiled, going down the ladder. Ron knew very well that it was Neville's birthday. Ginny had gotten wind of it and organized a party, as she had for Hermione. Was Ginny still interested in Malfoy? he had to wonder. He had mixed feelings about this. Perhaps Ginny was just organizing the party as Neville's friend, not a potential girlfriend. She'd talked Ron into being the delaying tactic, keeping Neville from coming back to the common room until they'd gotten everything ready.

When Harry arrived, Ginny and Hermione were still running around frantically. “Harry!” Ginny said imperiously. “Get out your wand! Fix those falling streamers by the stairs!” He did as she asked--or rather commanded--trying not to show how amused he was by her perfectionism. Hermione charmed the glass punch bowl so that it was suddenly frosted over; then she etched fairy-like designs in the frost with a wave of her wand. Over the mantel hung a banner declaring, “Happy 4th Birthday Neville.”

Harry frowned. “Uh, Ginny? I believe Neville is sixteen.”

She laughed. “He's sixteen *years* old, but this is only the fourth *birthday* he's ever had. Because it's the Leap Day! You know, it only rolls around once every four years.”

Harry was nodding with understanding before she was finished. Neville would certainly be surprised, he thought.

Suddenly, a loud voice in the corridor was giving the password. Ron was heard very clearly saying, “Kneazles!” Harry fought the urge to shout, “Gezundheit!” as an answer.

The portrait swung open, and Ron climbed through. A moment later, Neville followed, but he didn’t have a chance to come in under his own power; he was dragged in bodily by a half-dozen people, while practically everyone in the house shouted, “Surprise!” or “Happy Birthday!”

Bowled over, Neville was grinning broadly, until he looked up and saw the banner over the mantel, and then he was laughing outright. Oddly, Harry couldn’t remember seeing Neville laugh before. Surely he had, Harry thought. That’s ridiculous. But if he had seen him laugh, it had been a very long time.

When the first excitement was over and Neville had been given a place of honor by the fireplace and a very silly hat to wear (a large stuffed vulture was on top), the presents were brought out. Harry had pitched in most of the money for a Wizarding Wireless for Neville (Ron, Ginny and Hermione were going to pay him back) and as soon as Neville saw what it was, he turned it on so there would be music for the party. He also received a glass terrarium from Seamus, Dean, Lee, Fred and George, for his toad Trevor to live in style. Neville fetched Trevor and placed him in it, and Trevor seemed quite taken with the artificial pond with its little sandy bank and smooth, round stones, ferns and other foliage. It was also stocked with a number of choice insects which could not leave the terrarium, and Trevor started pulling them into his mouth with gusto.

After the gifts, the refreshments were passed round, and then George and Angelina started dancing to the wireless, and little by little, other people joined in. Neville asked Ginny to dance after Ron and Parvati started. Harry remembered Ron dancing with her at the Christmas party (although at the time, he was unsure whether it was Parvati or Padma). Harry somewhat self-consciously asked Hermione to dance.

Harry held her loosely, his hands on her waist, her hands on his shoulders. He noticed that Parvati was wearing her birthday sweater from Lavender again. Ron was holding her closely, his hands caressing her back. Harry saw that Neville and Ginny were dancing loosely as he and Hermione were. That was something of a relief, as it seemed to indicate they were still just friends. On the other hand, Harry thought, Hermione and I are not really just friends any more...

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ron and Parvati move toward the portrait hole. He had an idea of what they might be going off to do, and it occurred to him that he and Hermione hadn’t done that for a while. He whispered in her ear, letting her know what he was suggesting.

“Where?” she whispered back. “The Charms classroom is out of the question...”

“How about Transfiguration? It’s not far,” he breathed. She nodded.

“You go first. I’ll wait--oh, ten minutes. That should be safe.” Harry murmured agreement.

When the song ended, he separated from her and went up the stairs to his dorm to get the Invisibility Cloak. He tucked it under his robes, almost dropping it when climbing out of the portrait hole, but he saved it in time. Ginny looked at him coldly as he left. What was with her lately? he wondered.

Once he was in the corridor, he looked around carefully before donning the Invisibility Cloak, hoping he would not run into Moody. He proceeded carefully to the Transfiguration classroom, so he wouldn't accidentally collide with someone coming around a corner suddenly.

As he neared Transfiguration, Sandy hissed to him, "A bull wants a fish..." Harry frowned. A bull? A fish? Whom had Sandy called a fish before? Parvati. Harry had a feeling he knew who the bull was. They must be nearby, Harry thought, for Sandy to be Seeing anything. He hissed to her, "Thanks for the heads up, Sandy, but while I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak, I need to be as quiet as possible."

"I understand."

"Thanks, Sandy."

He reached the Transfiguration classroom. The door was open; the moment he entered, he saw them in the far corner, partially concealed behind a stack of extra chairs. Ron had his arms around Parvati, his hands were on her bare back under her thin violet sweater. Harry could see her smooth golden brown skin; in fact, he could see almost her whole back. She didn't appear to be wearing anything under the sweater. Subtle, Harry thought. Then he remembered Hermione on the day he'd first kissed her--but that wasn't planned. Parvati seemed to know exactly what she was doing. Well, Harry realized, she'd started to notice Ron after the Gryffindor/Slytherin match in the fall. Padma had too. Perhaps the two of them had reached some sort of agreement about who was going to "get" him.

But the question in Harry's brain was, Why had Ron suddenly decided to be with Parvati? After all, Hermione was on the verge of being rid of Viktor, and he hadn't seen any indication that Ron had suddenly stopped caring for her or being attracted to her. In fact, Harry was well aware of the fact that Ron's hormones were in as much of an uproar as his own. He had caught him on more than one occasion looking at a Muggle skin magazine that Dean kept stashed under his mattress. (Harry had also had a look at it.) But then he remembered Ron's panic when he'd tried to speak to him about Hermione, his fear that she'd either laugh in his face or that if they did try to be a couple and failed, everything would change. Why didn't I ever think of that? Harry wondered. It simply hadn't seemed like a problem to him. Parvati, on the other hand, was very pretty, attracted to Ron, and not exactly Ron's friend; a rejection or failed relationship with her wouldn't be the same as with Hermione.

Hermione! She would be here soon, Harry thought. He looked over at Ron and Parvati again. Ron had moved his hands down below her waist; she was clutching him around the middle as they kissed; he could see their tongues shooting out, then Ron moved his mouth down her throat, down the low V of her sweater, while she threw her head back, an animal-like sound

escaping from her which Harry did not associate with Parvati. Her hands started to move lower on Ron as well, and Harry's mouth went dry.

Then he remembered Malfoy saying, "Who knows what you've seen in that Invisibility Cloak of yours," and admitting to spying on Hannah and Ernie. I am not like Malfoy, he insisted to himself. He carefully backed out of the room, waiting for Hermione, wanting to make absolutely certain she did not see Ron and Parvati. He tried to resist the urge to look again to see why Ron was making that moaning sound...What if McGonagall were to come in? he wondered.

Harry felt like he was waiting years for Hermione to show up. Finally, he heard a step at the end of the corridor. She was walking forward briskly, swinging her arms, her prefect's badge gleaming, her black robes billowing behind her. Harry smiled at the sight of her. He walked down the corridor to meet her, well away from the Transfiguration classroom. Somehow he managed to forget he was wearing his Invisibility Cloak. He kept expecting her to stop any second. She seemed to be looking right at him. Then they collided painfully, both falling onto the hard stone floor.

"Ow," she groaned, wincing. "Harry, watch where you're going. I was almost at the Transfiguration classroom..."

"That's the problem." he whispered, helping her up, then adjusting his cloak again. "Someone else thought of it first. I thought we could go up to Fluffy's old hangout."

"You mean where you were ducking the prefects' meeting?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry about that--"

She sighed as she walked, speaking lowly, trying not to move her lips too much. "I can't really blame you. Roger was being a real prick."

"Hermione!" Harry said in shock, then clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Harry, if there's one person who does not inspire me to watch my language, it's Roger Davies. And if there's another person, it's Draco Malfoy."

"Where?" Harry said, looking around anxiously.

"I didn't mean he was here, silly. Oh, be careful; are you in front of me? We're coming up on one of those trick steps Neville always used to forget."

"Thank goodness for Neville!" Harry said softly. "Davies was so happy about him beating me he was less of a prick than usual at Sunday night's meeting."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Hermione said softly. "Language."

"Hey, if you can say it, I can say it." He smiled under the cloak.

When they reached the door, Hermione opened it quietly, looking up and down the corridor. She lit her wand and held the door open so Harry could slip past her. She closed the door and he removed the cloak, practically throwing it on the floor. She looked at him with a helpless, open expression that made him catch his breath. She slid her hands around his neck and he pulled her to him, covering her mouth with his, feeling her open her mouth, clutching at her desperately. She dropped her lit wand and it went out.

They held each other in the total darkness, mouths ravenous, hands more adventurous than in the recent past. It's amazing how brave you can be in the dark, Harry thought as he drew her down onto the floor. They were sitting side by side against the door, turned to each other, mouths linked, her hands in his hair, his on her back, slowly and cautiously moving one to the front, remembering that night in the common room when they were interrupted by Ginny and Malfoy.

Suddenly, Hermione pulled away from him. "Ow," she said, grunting softly. "why do stone floors have to be so hard?" she asked rhetorically.

"It's not so bad in here," Harry said, reaching out to find her again, running one hand lightly down her leg.

"It's not being in here, really," she said, although he thought part of the problem was being in such a comfortless place. "It's that fall I took downstairs. I feel so sore now."

"Well then you shouldn't be sitting on a hard stone floor. Come here, sit on my lap."

He wished he could see her face. He heard her hesitate. "Well, all right," she finally said, and crawled into his lap, sitting on him sideways, her legs extending to his right.

"Is that better?" he whispered in her ear, making her shudder from his mouth being so close to it. She put her right arm around his shoulders.

"Much. It's just that--I'm so sore," she said again.

"How's this?" he said softly, moving his left hand down below her waist, caressing in light circles. He leaned forward and found her ear again, kissed it lightly, then moved his lips down her jawbone, down her neck, feeling the insistent pulse beneath the skin.

"Oh, Harry," she sighed, sinking her fingers into his hair again. Whether it was because of his hands or mouth, he didn't know, but he kept on, wanting to hear her sound like that again.

He tried not to think about Ron and Parvati and what Hermione might have done if she'd seen them. He lifted her chin and found her mouth again. He didn't want to think about them right now. He just knew that he wanted to kiss her and hold her and touch her, and as it went on he became sadder and sadder, because he knew that soon they would have to stop. He didn't

want her to remember being with him on a cold stone floor in a dark room the first time; he wasn't sure how to manage it, but he wanted it to be special.

Finally, he decided it was time to stop, before they couldn't. He fumbled for his wand, lit it so he could see to fasten his robes, fasten hers, straighten his glasses. She was beautifully flustered in the dim light, her hair in her face, sweat beading on her forehead and upper lip. She stood up to brush down her robes, and he tried not to sigh with relief too loudly when she got off him. Having her sit on him had been both wonderful and excruciating. He also stood, shaking out his robes. She stooped to get her wand, then handed him the Invisibility Cloak. She seemed so practical and businesslike suddenly. He pulled her to him again, opening his mouth suddenly, feeling her respond immediately, losing that core of reserve she wore like a suit of armor most of the time. He ended the kiss, looking down at her, running his thumb along her bottom lip. She looked back at him as though she might lose her composure at any moment.

Harry looked away from her; that look was almost the end of his own self-control. He opened the door, clutching his Invisibility Cloak, and then put it on. They walked back downstairs, Hermione looking for all the world like she was alone, Harry walking unseen beside her, aching for her and very, very grateful that she had not seen Ron and Parvati.

* * * * *

Harry was glad he and Hermione had taken some time to be together on Neville's birthday. Now that he was done his Animagus training (McGonagall just wanted him to check in once a week) he was able to concentrate on Quidditch more. They had a match against Hufflepuff coming up on March sixteenth, only about two more weeks to prepare. The weather had already started to warm a bit. Harry felt that might be a red herring, as it had snowed in April in years past, but as the day of the match approached, the warm spring-like weather persisted, and Harry was optimistic about a fair day.

After Will Flitwick's show of support, many of the students had evidently decided that he probably had not cursed the Charms classroom doorway. Harry decided to go visit the hospital wing on a regular basis, talk to Cho and Flitwick, in case they could hear anything. Hermione went with him, looking very concerned about little Professor Flitwick. A possible solution for their comas was mandrake root, but Sprout's mandrakes wouldn't be mature for another month or two. Someone had Spellotaped Flitwick's many get-well cards to the wall behind his bed, as well as a banner saying, "We miss you Prof. Flitwick." Cho always seemed to have fresh flowers on her bedside table, Harry noticed. They were replenished every day, although he never saw it happen.

A few days before the Quidditch match, Harry thought he saw Viktor Krum leaving the entrance hall after he finished breakfast. Harry had left before the others; now that the weather was warming, he just wanted the chance to stand on the front steps and breathe in the fresh almost-spring air, look at a real blue sky scattered with fluffy white clouds, rather than the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall. But as soon as he saw Viktor, his plan changed. He waited

for Ron and Hermione by the front door and asked them to go down to Hagrid's without him and give his apologies for being late. Hermione looked like she was about to ask why, but Harry turned from them and headed for the marble stairs. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Ron take her arm and draw her away, out the door.

When he entered the infirmary, he saw again the fresh flowers on Cho's table, and he went to look for Madam Pomfrey in her office, but she wasn't there. He went to a door on the far side of the office which had frosted glass in it etched with the legend APOTHECARY. Harry had never been here before. He thought he saw a shadow moving about on the other side of the door and rapped gently on the glass.

He heard steps approaching the door, which was opened by a flustered-looking Madam Pomfrey, wearing a voluminous grey apron over her black robes, her face flushed with heat, wiry grey hair escaping from a sloppy bun. Harry saw a large bubbling cauldron hovering in the air above a purple fire, shelves with as many potions and potions ingredients as Snape's office, if not more.

Madam Pomfrey looked quite harried. Harry thought quickly. The way to get information, he knew from talking to McGonagall, was to behave as if you already have it.

"Madam Pomfrey, would you be sure to tell me if Viktor Krum doesn't come to see Cho in the next few days? I promised him I'd make sure she still had fresh flowers if he couldn't make it. The Cannons might be stepping up their practices."

She told him what he wanted to know without hesitating for a moment. "I'd be happy to tell you if he doesn't come, Potter, but I'll be surprised if that happens. Not a day has gone by since she's been in here but he's bringing her flowers and sitting by her bedside talking to her...usually more than once a day." He's been coming every day, Harry thought. He had suspected, but now he knew. He thanked Madam Pomfrey and returned to the infirmary to look at Cho and Flitwick before leaving.

A side effect of people knowing she'd broken up with him but not blaming him for her current state was that girls were suddenly asking him out. There was a Hogsmeade weekend coming up on the twenty-third, one week after the Quidditch match. After the most recent Dueling Club meeting, Susan Bones had shyly asked him if he wanted to go with her to Hogsmeade. He was shocked; she'd never said two words to him in Herbology. He had deflected her invitation by saying he wasn't ready to date again yet, thanks. Perhaps she thought he was harboring hopes of making up with Cho when she awoke. Mandy Brocklehurst then waylaid him after the prefects' meeting and asked him out for the same Hogsmeade weekend. What was so important about that weekend? Harry wondered.

He soon found out. A large parchment went up in the entrance hall announcing a traditional Scottish ceilidh on the day of the Hogsmeade trip, to be held in the town hall where they'd gone to the opera. Admission would be ten Sickles. The well-known wizarding bagpipe group Screaming Haggis was on tour, and they were stopping in Hogsmeade after playing Glasgow

and Edinburgh but before going up to the Orkneys. Harry learned that ceilidh was pronounced “kelly” when Dumbledore announced it at dinner the evening after the parchment went up. But Harry was still mystified.

“What’s a seelid--I mean, a kelly?” he asked Hermione across the table while they ate.

“A ceilidh,” she said it more like kay-lee, “is a gathering, a dance. With traditional Scottish reels and that sort of thing. You know, lots of bagpipes, usually some sword dancing. And the men are supposed to wear kilts.”

Kilts! Harry thought, alarmed. Had Susan and Mandy been asking him on a date that would required him to wear a kilt? But soon, Susan and Mandy were the least of his problems. A fourth-year Slytherin girl he didn’t know asked him to the ceilidh. He turned her down. She had a thick Scottish burr and he could barely understand what she said. He did think, though, that it took guts for a Slytherin to ask him out. Then, to make matters worse, Katie Bell cornered him in the common room and asked him to the same dance. He deflected her, stuttering nervously the whole time. But the really difficult refusal came when Alicia trapped him in the Quidditch changing room after practice the day before the match.

She put her hand on his arm and stopped him leaving after the other players had left. No one seemed to miss them. He looked at her quizzically.

“Alicia, what--” he started to say, when she pushed him up against the wall and slid her hands up around his neck. The next thing he knew she had pulled his face down to hers and put her mouth against his, then an insistent tongue was trying to slip between his teeth...

He sputtered and pulled back, the taste of her still in his mouth. He swallowed and looked at her. She appeared as perfect as ever. Her straight blonde hair shivered around her chin, her crystal-blue eyes looked at him curiously. Her smooth porcelain skin had not a blemish or freckle, and he could easily picture her in a riding habit, nodding imperiously at a groom holding her mount. But for some reason, he pictured her in an old-fashioned habit with a large skirt and fitted black jacket, a lace jabot at her throat and a jaunty black bowler with black netting pulled down over her aristocratic face as she sat side-saddle on a gleaming chestnut thoroughbred...

She took advantage of his mind wandering to kiss him again, and this time she was more successful; he found himself kissing her back, hands holding her shoulders, mouth on auto-pilot for almost ten seconds before he came to his senses and pushed her away.

“Alicia! Stop!” he said when he had his brain back.

She was smiling knowingly. “Your words say stop, but your actions--”

“Alicia! You--you caught me by surprise. This isn’t about the ceilidh, is it? Because I’m not going with you.”

She looked rather hurt. “Yes, I was going to ask you to the ceilidh--” she said, tears in her voice. He knew he shouldn’t have said that; he should have let her ask him out, then tactfully turn her down. He realized he probably seemed awfully conceited to assume she was going to ask him to the dance.

“I’m sorry, Alicia, I didn’t mean to--” but she backed up from him, laughing and yet seeming like the laughter was to stave off her tears.

“What was I thinking?” she asked, as if she was talking to herself, not him. “What made me think I could--that Harry Potter would--”

“Alicia!” he shouted to get her to look at him. “Are you all right?”

She looked at him, rather dazed, then shaking her head as if to clear it. When she spoke, she sounded closer to normal.

“Harry--I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that. I just--I just felt this compulsion--I know that’s not a good excuse, but you’re not seeing anyone now--”

“And I don’t want to,” he said, trying to soften the edge of his voice a little. “I’m just--not ready to do that again, not yet--”

She nodded, swallowing, wiped her eyes delicately, so that there were no longer unshed tears there, ready to spill over her cheeks. “I understand.”

But did she? wondered Harry. In a way, he was seeing someone else, but it seemed more tactful to wait and see whether Cho and Flitwick could be wakened by the mandrakes before going public with a new relationship--especially with one of his best friends.

Alicia whispered, “Can we just pretend this never happened?”

Harry nodded. “Of course. Total amnesia.”

She smiled. “Almost as good as a memory charm.” Then, looking at him wistfully for a moment, she turned and ran out of the changing room. Harry let his breath out, not having even realized he was holding it. Clearly, he needed to figure out what to do about the damn ceilidh.

* * * * *

Gryffindor beat Hufflepuff by a respectable two-hundred ten to thirty. Gryffindor was now in the lead for the Quidditch cup, with five-hundred and twenty points. Slytherin only had two-hundred and ninety from their match against Hufflepuff, since they were scoreless against Gryffindor. And Hufflepuff had a paltry one-hundred-ten points and no wins after three matches. Ravenclaw only had two-hundred and ten, but unlike Slytherin, they still had two

matches yet. The schedule had been rearranged by Madam Hooch so that Ravenclaw was playing in the late April match and the final match of the year in early June; everyone was hoping that Cho Chang would be recovered and ready to play Seeker by then, with little Flitwick looking on and cheering for his house team.

Even though the Quaffle had only gotten past him three times, Ron was enormously chagrined about this. The new Hufflepuff captain was Ashraf el-Madi, who played Chaser. He had scored the thirty points, looking venomously at Ron the entire time. Harry thought el-Madi seemed more like a Slytherin than a Hufflepuff. He had given Harry a funny look when they shook hands before the match. Harry had shuddered afterward; he was glad el-Madi was a seventh-year. The Hufflepuffs would have to choose another captain next year.

The rest of the team just wasn't up to el-Madi, however. Ernie Macmillan struggled as the Keeper, letting Gryffindor score on him six times. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were the other Chasers; Susan wasn't bad, but Hannah wasn't any better at Quidditch than she was at dueling. The Beaters, a fourth year named Drumm and a sixth year named Carson, were almost more of a danger to their own teammates than to the Gryffindors. They reminded Harry of how Hermione had played at the Burrow. Four times Justin had almost been struck by Bludgers hit by his own teammates.

Harry felt in his element again. Even though it wasn't shaping up to be very difficult to play Hufflepuff, Harry didn't want to be lackadaisical about catching the Snitch. If Justin got to it first, Hufflepuff would still win. When Harry spotted the Snitch, he zoomed for it on his Firebolt, executing a perfect roll before going into the dive, as Justin followed half a field behind. Harry flew around the pitch, holding the Snitch over his head, smiling.

When both teams landed and Harry shook el-Madi's hand again, he couldn't help but notice a sadness in his hooded eyes that seemed to have little to do with losing at Quidditch. Perhaps his hostility earlier had simply been loyalty to his house, rather than a Slytherin-like quality. All of the Hufflepuffs seemed pretty subdued. It wasn't just that they were out of the running for the Quidditch Cup, Harry suspected. They'd all looked like they'd been carrying a heavy burden all year. Cedric should have been their captain still, and their Seeker. Instead, Ashraf el-Madi had been tapped to be captain, and Muggle-born Justin, who was small and lithe but had never played Quidditch before, was now their none-too-sharp-eyed Seeker. Perhaps el-Madi resented Harry for living when Cedric was dead. Harry himself felt this way quite often.

The other Gryffindors seemed to get the idea that this wasn't the sort of win to be gloated over. This wasn't beating Slytherin. They walked back to the castle talking quietly, Fred and George clowning rather half-heartedly, no one discussing the match. Ron walked with his arm around Parvati's shoulder, her arm around his waist. They both looked rather serious somehow. Harry trailed behind everyone else, and Hermione noticed and slowed her pace.

"Are you all right, Harry?" she said softly, putting her hand on his arm. He didn't look at her, nodding. "If you say so," she murmured, obviously unconvinced. "Oh, I almost forgot. You know the ceilidh? Viktor says he can't come. I had hoped he would show up to break up with

me, or maybe I could break up with him. But now--anyway, everyone else is going, and it sounds like fun..."

"Actually, I was going to ask you. But to tell the truth, I've been fending off all of these invitations from other girls. Rather amazing. I mean Cho did break up with me, but she is in a coma now. You'd think they'd be a little more sensitive." Then he noticed Hermione's face. "I didn't mean you too! It's just that--well, we'll have to tell people we're going as friends. You're still with Viktor, technically, and I've been telling all these girls I don't want to be in a relationship again already--not that I ever really felt like I was in one--oh! I almost forgot!" He stopped and turned to face her. "Hermione, I--well, it wasn't really me--okay, it kind of was, but I didn't start it--oh, dammit! Here!" He extended his foot out toward her. She stared down at it.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Mash it! Stomp on it! Go on!"

"Harry, what are you talking about?"

He sighed. "Listen, don't be mad at her. And don't tell anyone. Alicia is one of the girls who asked me out. And she--she kissed me."

Hermione took this in, looking strangely calm. "And?"

"And, well, I kind of kissed her back for a few seconds. But then I put a stop to all of it!"

Hermione continued to look at him with a strange calmness. "So that's it?" He nodded. "Harry, I'm not going to mash your foot. It certainly doesn't sound like you were trying to get Alicia to kiss you. I'm fine."

"You're fine?" he said, incredulous.

"Harry, I know that--that I once said I wanted this too much, that I felt out of control, but that's not true anymore." She looked at his face for a moment, then, as if realizing how this sounded, she got a horrified look on her face and plunged on. "Oh, Harry, I don't mean--I mean I still want us to be together. I just don't feel--I don't know how to put it--insane? Desperate? None of this is probably coming out right. I feel confident that everything will work itself out. That's it. I think I lacked that confidence before, and it made me feel rather frantic about us. In the last month, I've felt a kind of calmness come over me. I just feel that we're inevitable, somehow, and to expend a huge amount of mental energy obsessing about us would just be a waste. I have no doubts about us, Harry. I know we're going to be fine. I don't care how many girls throw themselves at you. I think I know you pretty well by now, Harry, and you haven't given me any reason to worry." She paused. "Well, except for one thing..."

"What?"

“Well--you do seem rather--odd about Malfoy and Ginny.”

Harry tried to keep his face impassive. “You tried to warn him yourself about his behaving himself with her.”

“That was because of her age. You told him he had to keep behaving himself after her birthday as well. And the way you said it--”

“I thought you said you didn’t care how many girls threw themselves at me?”

“Yes, but Ginny isn’t one of those girls, is she?”

Harry looked at her, a lump in his throat. “I’m just thinking of Ron. He’ll be mad enough when he finds out about them--and that goes for you now too. We’re both keeping this from him. I’m just trying to keep what he doesn’t know to a minimum.”

But although she nodded, Harry could see she was unconvinced. It wasn’t surprising. Harry didn’t feel particularly convinced by his own words. He reached out for her hand and she gave it to him. He took a deep breath before continuing.

“I’ve been meaning to mention something to you, Hermione. There’s this potion, it’s called Prophylaxis Potion--”

“Yes. I know all about that.” She sounded very calm again, like she’d forgotten about Ginny.

“You do?”

“Don’t worry Harry. When the time is right--”

She squeezed his hand, then released it. They were at the door to the castle. She walked in ahead of him, and he stood watching her, having difficulty breathing suddenly. Maybe this would happen after all, Harry thought. Perhaps she was right, and everything would work out. He certainly hoped so.

Then, he realized that if they were going to the ceilidh in one week, he would need a kilt. Suddenly, wearing a kilt to go to a dance with Hermione didn’t seem like such an onerous task. But how to get it?

Then he remembered what he had done when he needed a Pensieve, and Muggle newspapers: he’d contacted Sirius. But he didn’t have time for Hedwig to fly all the way down to Manchester and back. How to do it?

As he passed the doorway to the Great Hall, he had an idea. He stopped and turned, walked into the enormous room, the enchanted ceiling showing the same brilliant blue sky he’d just been

playing under. His steps sounded very loud and echoed as he briskly crossed the hall, and he hesitated for only a moment before opening the door to the passage Snape had shown him.

He lit his wand and closed the door behind him, carrying his broom carefully and descending the stairs lightly, instinctively walking on tip-toe. When he reached the hidden passage that he and Snape had accessed by going behind the tapestry, Harry was momentarily flummoxed; where had Snape touched the wall again? Harry leaned his broom against the wall so he could run his left hand over the slightly damp stones, still holding his wand up so he could see.

Finally, part of the wall gave way; he put his shoulder to it and felt it pivot, groaning and complaining. When there was enough space for him to pass through, he turned himself sideways and slipped into Snape's office, carrying his broom, putting his wand away first. He breathed a sigh of relief and started to brush himself off, then looked up and into the inquisitive eyes of Severus Snape, sitting at his desk.

"And to what do I owe this visit?" Snape's oily voice met his ears. Harry felt himself redden. He'd been accused of breaking into Snape's office in the past, and now here he was actually doing it. He'd been hoping to use the powder on the mantel to call Sirius without Snape knowing about it, but now--

"I, um needed to talk to you and I didn't want to take the chance that someone might be in the Potions Dungeon and see me coming in," he lied, although, he thought, that could have been how it happened...

"What did you need to see me about?"

"Well--all right. Not really you. I needed to contact Sirius and I was hoping you'd let me use your fireplace to do it."

He nodded. "And why do you need to speak to Black?"

Harry fought the urge to shuffle his feet and look like a four-year-old. "Because--he's my godfather and I need a kilt for the ceilidh next week."

Snape sat up and looked concerned. "You're going? Are you sure you want to do that?"

Harry frowned. "Is the band that bad?"

He sneered. "I don't care about the damn band. We have some intelligence that there might--there might be some Death Eater activity..."

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Are you positive? Because a lot of the students are planning to go. Would they all be in danger?"

Snape sat back and put his fingers together, his brow knit in thought. "On the other hand,

perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing for the captain of the Dueling Club to be there. If anyone could probably manage Death Eaters...Are you taking a girl?"

"Hermione."

"Well, there you go. The two top students in the club. And you'll be prepared, since you'll know ahead of time. But don't tell the other students; I don't want to create a panic. We've had other leads go south. It's unclear whether one of our informants is actually a double-agent, giving us bad information on purpose. Four times in the last two months while Black was sent on a wild goose chase, elsewhere Muggles were being tortured or just played with by Death Eaters. The Ministry dispatched their Memory Charms people to take care of the aftermath, but Fudge is still ignoring the root problem. There is yet to be anything in the Daily Prophet about the Dark Lord returning, or about these Muggle attacks. Let alone the Westminster tube station."

"I didn't know about those attacks," Harry said, feeling a little left out.

"Black didn't see the need to tell you about every little bit of mischief they're up to, and I concur. You need to focus on school, on learning everything you can. On the one hand, I hope that everyone at the ceilidh will be safe. I'm going myself. But you're right; you'll need a kilt. Black should be able to get you the right clan. He'll know."

"I'm Scottish?"

He nodded. "I seem to remember your father mentioning something about his mother, or grandmother."

Harry nodded. Then he remembered something. "So, do you have a Clan Campbell kilt?"

Snape had been looking for something in a desk drawer, but now he snapped his head up; Harry had never before mentioned to Snape anything that he'd learned in the Pensieve. He had brought up the goblet of blood with Sirius, but never with Snape.

"Yes," he said softly. "I have one."

Harry looked toward the fireplace, wanting to dissipate the awkwardness. He put his hand near the powder on the mantel. "May I?" he asked. Snape nodded.

He threw some into the fire, saying, "Remus Lupin."

After a few moments, Lupin's face appeared in the flames. Harry smiled; he hadn't actually seen him in some time.

"Harry! How are you? Looks like you've been playing Quidditch. Was it a practice or a match?"

“Match. We won. Against Hufflepuff. Two-ten to thirty.”

“Excellent! I’ll get Sirius.” His head disappeared.

In a few more moments, Sirius’ head appeared in the flames. “Hello, Harry. Why the call?”

“Well, you know the ceilidh in Hogsmeade next week? I’m going. So I was hoping you could get me a kilt. Snape said you knew what the right clan would be. I didn’t even know my dad was Scottish.”

“Clan MacGregor. Very nice tartan, red and black primarily. Are you going with Hermione?”

Harry looked down, coloring, then caught Snape’s eye; he seemed interested that Sirius knew about Hermione. “Yes.”

“All right, I’ll get a length of tartan for her to wear around her shoulders. Women don’t wear kilts; they drape the tartans on themselves and hold it in place with a large sort of brooch with the clan crest on it.”

Harry hesitated now. “Sirius--are the Death Eaters going to attack the ceilidh? If that’s a possibility, shouldn’t Dumbledore cancel the Hogsmeade trip?”

Sirius sighed. “I don’t know what to think, Harry. I feel like we’ve been getting as much good information as bad lately. I mean, look at your situation; someone managed to bewitch the door of the Charms classroom in Hogwarts! How did someone infiltrate Hogwarts?”

Harry was perplexed. “I didn’t tell you anything about that.” He thought of Malfoy and the mystery of who had sent him the school owls.

“Yes, and I’ll be hacked off at you about that another time. Severus told me.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“At any rate, I’ll hopefully see you there.”

“Where?”

“At the ceilidh. And there will be other operatives there as well. Hopefully we’ll be so well-covered that the Death Eaters won’t dare pull anything. Plus, this will be a wizard gathering, not Muggle. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been to a wizard ceilidh, Harry?”

“Never been to any kind of ceilidh.”

“Well, it used to be that only the men danced. But Scottish magical folk gave women more

freedom and equality than Muggles pretty early on. Now the only wizard-only dancing is with the swords. Although, I suppose that if a witch wanted to join in the sword dancing, no one would stop her.”

“But Sirius--how will you be there? You’d be recognized, thrown back into Azkaban!”

Sirius smiled cryptically and flashed his eyes at Harry. “I didn’t say I would look like myself, did I?” Harry caught on; Polyjuice Potion.

“Be careful,” he cautioned him. Sirius took the warning in the affectionate way it was intended.

“I will,” he said to his godson gently. “Well! If I’m to get you and Hermione some Clan MacGregor gear, I’d better get going. I know the perfect place in Sloane Square in London. I’ll Apparate there and back this afternoon and you should have your kilt, tartan and everything else you need by tomorrow. And I don’t need to get you a dirk; you can use that knife I already gave you. It’s a magical dirk.”

“What does that have to do with the ceilidh? Not that I mind having another weapon...”

Sirius smiled. “I’ll also send a book so you know how to dress yourself properly. The dirk goes in your sock. Perhaps you can explain it to him, Severus.”

Snape nodded, and Harry tried not to laugh; if anyone had ever told him he’d be getting advice on how to dress from Snape...

“Well, I’d better get shopping then, Harry. Good bye for now. See you both next Saturday.” And he was gone. Harry thanked Snape and left through the secret passage again, grateful that Snape gave him a way to contact Sirius that was faster than owl post, but also somehow grateful that he wasn’t also in Clan Campbell, like Snape. He wondered what tartan Sirius would wear. And what face.

* * * * *

The next day at breakfast, Lupin’s owl delivered a large package to Harry from Sirius with his kilt, plus something called a sporran, some diamond-patterned socks, and several other alien-looking things he supposed he’d have to look up in the book Sirius also included about the Scottish Clans. A paper-wrapped parcel inside Harry’s larger package had Hermione’s name on it. She was surprised, opening it after moving her breakfast dishes aside.

“Oh,” she breathed when she took out a beautiful length of the red and black MacGregor tartan. Harry put out his hand and felt the material; it was a heavy wool, but silky soft. The kilt was slightly rougher. There was also a silver-colored brooch with a lion’s head in the middle, wearing a crown; it was flanked by a unicorn and a stag. Harry held it, looking at the stag wistfully, tracing it with his finger.

“Prongs...” he said softly, under his breath.

Unfortunately, Katie and Alicia were sitting across from them at the Gryffindor table that morning. Alicia eyed Hermione in a rather unfriendly way now.

“What’s that for?” she wanted to know, nodding at Hermione’s tartan.

Hermione looked at her as though she had no knowledge of her kissing Harry and asking him to the same dance.

“Harry and I are going to the ceilidh. As friends. But since I’m not Scottish, I’ll be wearing his tartan.”

Alicia and Katie looked at each other knowingly; perhaps their suspicions were just fueled by jealousy, but Harry started to worry about how much longer they were going to be able to keep things covered up. It was getting very awkward, and here they were, preparing rather publicly for what amounted to a date.

“As friends?” Katie said, sounding doubtful.

Hermione nodded, then started speaking rapidly. “You know, it’s quite fascinating how most Scottish wizards didn’t start wearing robes until the wearing of the tartan was outlawed after Culloden, in 1754. Before that, you couldn’t really tell a Scottish Muggle from a wizard, unless you actually saw him Apparate or do some other kind of magic. And did you know that Robert the Bruce was actually a wizard? Well, of course, that explains Bannockburn. I mean, if he hadn’t been a wizard...I’ve been reading this book from the library, ‘Great Scottish Wizards’, and it’s just amazing how many of the really famous Scots were magical...”

Alicia and Katie rolled their eyes and rose to leave. Harry smiled. Hermione really knew how to clear a room when she wanted to (and sometimes, when she didn’t want to). Of course, the really foolproof tactic was for her to start reciting ‘Hogwarts: A History’ verbatim, but any obscure book would do.

On her other side, Ron was wincing. “Is there any book in the library you haven’t memorized?” He was sitting with his arm around Parvati. Hermione looked at him coldly.

“Is there any book in this school you’ve actually opened?” she responded, then rose, taking her package from Sirius, leaving the hall. Ron followed her with his eyes, his expression inscrutable, then turned to Harry.

“So. You’re going to the ceilidh.”

Harry nodded, unsure whether he meant ‘you’ as singular or plural. Ron made a face. “Couldn’t pay me to wear a kilt. And I’m always hard up for money, so that’s saying something. We’re just going to hang out at Honeydukes and the Three Broomsticks.” Harry realized after a second that Ron’s ‘we’ included Parvati. He was still getting used to this. It felt rather odd.

Parvati also looked relieved, as though a ceilidh were the last place on earth she wanted to be. This was confirmed for Harry when she said, “Bagpipes...” and shuddered in revulsion.

“I rather like bagpipes,” Ginny said. She’d been sitting next to Katie. Next to her, Neville got a strange expression on his face. He turned to her now, looking a bit nervous.

“In that case--would you--would you like to go to the ceilidh with me, Ginny?”

Ginny looked at him, her mouth open. Ron was frowning. Harry wondered what she would do. She looked like she was afraid to hurt Neville’s feelings in front of so many people. She finally mumbled, “All right,” looking like she’d been tricked into it. Neville smiled.

“Thanks. I have to find out from my gran if she can send my dad’s old kilt. I don’t even remember what clan it is. I’m sure there’s a length of tartan too. Unless you have your own clan.”

She shook her head. “No. Yours will do fine.”

He smiled again and rose to go. Ginny remained, looking helplessly at Harry. She checked to see that Ron was speaking in low tones to Parvati before whispering to him, "Oh, dear. What do you suppose I should tell--you know who?" she whispered.

Harry hoped nobody present could hear Ginny; they might think she was talking about Voldemort. "If he's going," he said softly, "then he could probably cut in at some point. You two might actually have a chance to dance together."

Ginny looked thoughtful. "Hmm. I hadn't considered that. Do you think he would go?"

Harry sighed. "Well if you tell him you're going with Neville, do you think you could keep him away?"

Ginny smiled. "You have a point. I mean, though, he isn't Scottish, is he?"

He nodded, taking a piece of bacon from his plate. "Clan Campbell," he said casually, biting the bacon. Ginny was perplexed.

"How do you know?"

He looked guiltily at her. The Pensieve wasn't even something he could really tell Ginny about...But he managed to answer truthfully. "I heard Lucius Malfoy mention it once."

Ginny didn't have to know that the Lucius Malfoy in question had been twenty years younger, and that he'd heard it in a Pensieve. Ginny seemed satisfied. Harry thought, that's two more.

Three, counting Malfoy. He agreed that if Hogwarts students were going to be there, having many of them be members of the Dueling Club was an excellent idea. He wished he could warn more of them besides Hermione that they needed to keep on their toes, however. But he didn't dare. He would just have to hope that it would be all right.

* * * * *

On Thursday afternoon, Harry and Ron were staring dispiritedly at the entrails of yet another dead chicken, having, over time, grown inured to gazing at the mess. Trelawney came over to their table and leaned over, looking at their bird. "Ah," she said in that misty way of hers. "I know what I see. The question is, do you see it?" She looked at Harry expectantly; she'd been waiting all year for him to display his Inner Eye again, to no avail, since he had stopped wearing Sandy to Divination for a while. Even though he was wearing her now, he was determined to ignore any of her predictions unless she told him something of life-and-death importance.

Harry squinted at the bloody mess in front of him, trying to look thoughtful. Ron had that I'm-just-going-to-make-it-up look on his face. Harry couldn't wait to hear what he would say.

"What do you think?" he said to Ron, trying to keep a straight face.

Ron looked like he was pondering a question for the ages. "I think--that the sleeping will awake and feel refreshed. A curse will be lifted." Yeah, thought Harry; those of us sleeping in here will awake refreshed and the curse of being in Divination class will be lifted as soon as the bloody bell rings. Once when he'd told Dumbledore he'd fallen asleep in Divination, the headmaster hadn't even been surprised. He seemed to expect it.

Trelawney frowned. Harry could tell she knew she was being played. She didn't comment, but

moved on to Lavender and Parvati, who had also grown used to the dead chickens, even going so far as to volunteer to strangle their own, which still gave Harry the willies. Some dueler I'll be, going up against Death Eaters, he thought. Girls can bring themselves to strangle a chicken, but I can't.

After class was finally over, they found Hermione waiting for them at the foot of the ladder that led down from Trelawney's. She was practically hopping up and down with excitement. "Harry!" she said excitedly. "They're awake!"

He frowned, confused. "Who?"

"Cho and Flitwick! I just found out! Let's go!" She pulled his hand and Harry looked at Ron helplessly.

"See you in the common room," he called to him. Ron nodded. He didn't seem inclined to come with them, which Harry thought was just as well. He saw Ron put his arm around Parvati and start walking along to Gryffindor Tower while he was pulled along the corridor to the hospital wing by Hermione.

When they reached the door to the infirmary, Harry hesitated before putting his hand on the knob. Hermione was in no mood for that, however, and she put her hand on the knob instead, turning it and rushing inside. Harry followed her, as she started across the room. Little Flitwick was sitting up in his bed, talking with Will and some Ravenclaws who had already come. He waved cheerily to Harry and Hermione. A curtain had been drawn around Cho's bed, which was where they went now. But when they pulled back the curtain, they found Viktor Krum kissing Cho Chang on the mouth, holding her face in his hands. They stood still, struck dumb. Viktor turned, becoming the same color as the bedsheets. Cho looked embarrassed.

"Herm-own-ninny! And Harry! I--uh--"

Hermione smiled at him. "It's okay, Viktor. I--I knew you were coming every day to see her. I kind of suspected..."

Cho Chang looked at Viktor. "Every day?" Viktor got his color back, and then some, looking down at his feet. Cho smiled and laced her fingers through his, and he looked down at her, covering their linked hands with his other hand. Then Cho looked at Harry, horrified. "Oh, Harry--I'm sorry--"

He gave her an understanding look. "You already broke up with me, remember?"

She looked confused, then looked as though she remembered again. "That's right. And--hey! Why'd you send me that note? Are you the reason I've been asleep for--how long has it been, Viktor?"

"Forty days."

“Well,” Harry began. “Yes and no.”

“Yes and no what?” Cho demanded.

“Yes I’m the reason you’ve been asleep for forty days, but not because I sent you the note. I didn’t send it, in fact.” He explained to her how Ron and Hermione had also received notes, and he had prevented them from going. He hadn’t known she’d received a note, so he hadn’t been able to warn her. “We still don’t know who did it,” Harry told her. “But you clearly did the right thing to break up with me. I wondered for a while if I ever should have gone out with you, whether it would make you a target...”

She grimaced. “I’m the one who asked you out, Harry. I had my eyes wide open.”

He nodded, not wanting to argue with her. Viktor looked at Hermione again. “I am sorry for the way things vorked out, Herm-own-ninny...”

She patted Viktor on the arm, smiling. “I’m not. You two look pretty happy.” Cho and Viktor gazed at each other; they did, actually. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all, Harry thought. He felt a kind of matchmaker-smugness come over him. He and Hermione decided to leave Cho and Viktor alone when they started to kiss again, clearly forgetting they weren’t alone.

Outside the curtain, they saw that Flitwick’s visitors had left, so they went to talk to him.

“Harry! Hermione! How nice to see you again. How nice to see anyone again!” he chuckled. Forty days of bedrest didn’t seem to have disagreed with him. Harry, however, was having trouble meeting his eyes. Flitwick noticed. His voice became uncharacteristically commanding. “Harry. Look at me.” Harry raised his eyes to the little wizard’s and swallowed. “Will told me people had been blaming you for what happened. He told me about Ron’s and Hermione’s notes. Of course you wouldn’t do such a thing. This is not your fault. Although, I would like to find out who did it. Quite ingenious. A very simple burglar alarm charm, actually, slightly obscure; it’s been superseded by more complex charms for the same purpose, so it isn’t used very much any more. It simply puts the victim into an enchanted sleep for forty days, after which they usually wake up in prison, having been tried while asleep. Did you know you could be tried for burglary under wizarding law while you are asleep? The law only requires that the accused be present; not conscious.” He laughed, and Harry and Hermione laughed with him. “I half expected to wake up in a cell at the Ministry of Magic, convicted of robbing my own classroom!” he crowed.

“But why couldn’t Professor Dumbledore or Madam Pomfrey wake you and Cho?” Hermione wanted to know.

“For the very reason I just said; it’s an enchanted sleep. There is absolutely nothing that can be done before the forty days are up. One just has to wait.”

“Then--it’s not dark magic?”

He frowned. “Not even close. It’s harmless stuff. Inconvenient, I’ll grant you. I hope you have been keeping up with your O.W.L. preparation...”

“Of course,” Hermione assured him. “And Aberforth was teaching for the last three weeks...”

He sat up straighter now, frowning more deeply. “Aberforth Dumbledore?” Now he grimaced. “Well! Thank goodness I’m awake now!”

Harry was perplexed. What did the other teachers have against Aberforth? Was it that ‘inappropriate charms on a goat’ thing? He’d noticed in the three weeks Aberforth had been teaching that the other teachers avoided him like the plague, and Professors Sinistra and Vector appeared to be staring venomously at him and whispering behind their hands at mealtimes. Snape definitely did not like him; Harry heard him deliver more than one cutting remark in his direction. Even though he was Dumbledore’s brother, even McGonagall and Sprout looked askance at him. Now Flitwick, it appeared, was none too pleased to hear that Aberforth had been covering his classes. Boy, Harry thought, people in the wizarding world can sure carry a grudge for a long time...

Harry and Hermione bade Flitwick goodbye, and when they were in the corridor outside the infirmary once more, they couldn’t help but grin foolishly at each other. Hermione slid her arms up around his neck and he bent down to kiss her; they were each free! Cho and Viktor were together, she and Flitwick were unharmed and feeling just fine, and as the kiss deepened and Harry pulled her closer to him, he thought that he couldn’t remember when he’d had a better day.

“Ahem!” came a familiar throat clearing. As Harry jerked himself away from Hermione, he was ready to face--

Aberforth Dumbledore. When Harry saw it was him, and not his brother, he heaved a sigh of relief. Aberforth looked mildly amused at the scene he’d interrupted. “Hello Harry, Hermione. You’re--blocking the door to the infirmary.” His eyes twinkled so like his brother’s that Harry wondered whether they were twins. Albus Dumbledore a twin! Why had it never occurred to him before? The differences between them were superficial; hair length, the cut of the beard, Aberforth’s tan...It made a certain amount of sense. Harry wondered, however, when he would ever get up the nerve to ask either of them. Certainly this was not the time.

“Are you sure,” Hermione asked Aberforth diplomatically, as though he hadn’t just caught her exploring Harry’s tonsils, “that you want to go in there? Professor Flitwick seemed a bit--agitated to learn that you’d been teaching his classes.”

Aberforth looked merely amused. “I daresay he would be. I don’t intend to let him get to me, Hermione. I’ve developed a pretty thick skin over the years.” Harry and Hermione stepped out

of the way and Aberforth opened the door of the infirmary. Then, before closing it, he turned to them again.

“Well, this will probably be goodbye. From what you say, Flitwick will want to get right back to teaching his own classes tomorrow.” They each said goodbye to him; Harry felt he really would miss him. He was so easy to be around, having all of Dumbledore’s easygoing qualities, but none of his authority as headmaster.

“Good luck on your O.W.L.s,” he said to them finally. “And Harry--” Harry turned to him again. Aberforth winked one blue eye. “I’ll see you soon.” Then he closed the door to the infirmary.

Two seconds later they heard Flitwick cry, “Aberforth Dumbledore, what have you done to my classes?” Harry and Hermione smiled, walking away down the corridor, refraining from laughing until they’d gone a respectable distance. Then, as they went back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry puzzled over the last thing Aberforth had said. “I’ll see you soon.” But he was leaving, he’d said. He thought of saying something to Hermione, changed his mind. Oh well, thought Harry. He probably just meant he was going to the ceilidh or something. Harry was starting to look forward to that more and more himself. He smiled at Hermione, walking beside him. They would actually be going together, almost like a couple. This would be a good weekend. If there were no Death Eaters.

* * * * *

After classes on Friday, Harry, Ron and Hermione went to the library together. Harry and Ron were doing research on a History of Magic essay which Hermione had already finished (they’d been putting it off, as usual). Harry and Ron wanted to be done with it before the Hogsmeade outing, if possible. Hermione was reading more about Scotland’s wizarding past, trying to get some idea of what the ceilidh would be like. Finally, she had gleaned everything she could on the subject.

“I’m going back to Gryffindor Tower. I want to see if Ginny can help me drape my tartan correctly. I’ll see you two at dinner, I suppose?”

Harry looked down at the three inches he’d written so far for his three-foot essay; Ron had written even less. Harry sighed. “If we’re lucky, we’ll have these done by then.”

She smiled at him. “Well, at least you’re making a start, finally. You can always finish on Sunday.” But after she left Harry thought, When Sunday? During Dueling Club? Or the prefects’ meeting? He was starting to feel just a bit overextended. At least Ron didn’t have to go to the idiotic prefects’ meetings. But if Harry told him how lucky he was, he would just think Harry was patronizing him again, complaining about being rich, famous Harry Potter. Harry sighed. He was feeling like he was walking on eggshells with Ron more and more often.

After a little while, they heard a group of students come into the library and sit on the other side of the bookcase behind which Harry and Ron were seated. They didn't seem to be in the library to study.

"I heard Susan asked him," came a familiar voice; a little like Parvati's, but with more of an edge to it. Must be Padma, Harry thought.

"Didn't you ask him, Mandy?" said another voice. Harry thought it might be Niamh Quirke. Which would mean these were Ravenclaw girls, gossiping in the library. Mandy would be Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Yes," Harry heard Mandy's reluctant admission. "But he also turned down Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell, I heard."

Harry had been hoping against hope that they might be talking about someone else. But as soon as he heard this, he knew it was no good. He looked at Ron, measuring his meager essay and frowning; had he figured out yet what they were talking about? He wished he could perform some sort of silencing charm without Ron noticing.

Unfortunately, the girls went on. He heard Niamh's voice next. "So is he going or not?"

"Yes. With Hermione Granger," Padma answered her. Ron's head jerked up. He looked at Harry with wide eyes. Harry widened his eyes as well, acting as though he hadn't previously known who they were discussing.

Harry and Ron heard Niamh snort in derision. "Like I couldn't have seen that coming."

Padma said, "Parvati said they're going as friends."

Another snort from Niamh. "Your sister had better watch herself. That Ron Weasley's probably going to throw her over as soon as Harry Potter's done with Hermione Granger. He's just the type, isn't he, to wait for his famous friend's cast-offs. He'd probably be with Cho Chang already if she hadn't taken up with Viktor Krum, and don't get me started on him..."

Padma chimed in, "Oh, I agree about Hermione Granger. I mean, he went to the Yule Ball with me, then spent the whole time ogling her. He's been panting after her for years, but he was really so obvious that night. Classic dog in the manger..."

Harry dared to glance at Ron. He had never seen him so angry. His face was almost as red as his hair, and his nostrils were flaring; his jaw was clenched, as though he had to try very hard not to spit out a hateful retort to what they had just said. Instead, in what Harry felt was a great show of self-control for Ron, he threw his things into his rucksack and prepared to storm out of the library. Harry threw his things into his bag as well, and also rose to leave. Ron stopped before going, glaring at the girls, who were startled to see him. Niamh had been about to say something else, but looked like she changed her mind when she saw Ron's face. He too looked

like he might say something, then turned and left, steam practically coming out of his ears.

Harry remained, staring them down, breathing through his nose, also feeling the anger roiling through him. "In future," he said to them formally and stiffly, "I would recommend not gossiping about people who are sitting less than ten feet away. In fact, not gossiping at all is something you might try." They looked back at him, Mandy terrified, Padma still looking alarmed at the way Harry and Ron had seemed to materialize from nowhere. Niamh alone was trying to maintain her composure, staring back at him. He looked her in the eye now.

"See you in Dueling Club, Niamh," he said softly, hoping it sounded like the threat it was. When he saw the change in her expression, he knew she understood. Yes, Niamh, he thought. Be afraid. You have no idea...

Actually, he hoped he could calm down a bit by Sunday, if not quite a bit sooner. He stormed out of the library, having trouble seeing, he was so angry about the thoughtless things they'd said. He felt that if he'd stayed any longer, the three of them would have been floating on the ceiling, like Aunt Marge tripled. He looked around the corridor. Ron was gone. Harry strode quickly in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, hoping that was where he'd headed.

When he reached the corridor where the portrait of the fat lady was, Harry was almost run over by Neville, who looked disheveled and disoriented. His eyes were wild. He gripped Harry by the shoulders and shook him slightly.

"Harry I'm going to make a potion, but I'm out of *Eupatorium fistulosum*---do you have any?" Unfortunately, at the same moment he mentioned the plant, Sandy said something about a bull and a fish, and Harry's head felt split in two. He was confused, sputtering his reply.

"What? No. Why don't you go ask Professor Sprout?"

Neville hit his head dramatically. "The greenhouses! Of course! I could kiss you!"

Harry backed up, taking Neville's hands from him. "Please don't. I have to go--" but Neville hadn't waited to hear even this brief sentence; he'd already run off. Harry stared after him. Boy, he thought, every time I turn around, Neville's trying out a new personality. Now it's scary raving lunatic. Great.

Shaking his head, he climbed in the portrait hole after giving the password. He had thought about stopping to ask Sandy to repeat what she'd said, but he was in too much of a hurry. There was no one in the common room but Lavender, sitting in an armchair near the stairs as though she were pulling guard duty.

"Hey, Lavender," Harry said by way of an off-handed greeting as he passed her, preparing to climb the steps to his dorm, where he hoped Ron might be.

"Harry!" Lavender said abruptly and very loudly, almost in a panic. "Don't go up there!"

Harry stopped, turned around and looked at her with his brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"Well, um--" she paused, looking like she in fact wanted to tell very much, but he had to earn the right to be told, or show how much it mattered to him.

Just then, Ginny and Hermione came down the stairs from the girls' dorms, chatting about the ceilidh. They stopped abruptly when they saw Harry glaring at Lavender. But he needn't have worried; Lavender had a larger audience now, and a choice one at that.

"Well," she said to Harry, speaking far louder than necessary, so even if Ginny and Hermione had wanted to avoid hearing her, it would have been very difficult. "Ron came storming in here, looking really hacked off. Parvati and I were just talking. He grabbed her and stood her up. Then he kissed her, and I mean *kissed*..." she paused for dramatic effect. "Then he whispered something in her ear, and after that she was practically dragging him to the stairs going up to the boys' dorms. But he wouldn't let her walk; he picked her up and carried her up the stairs." Lavender looked triumphant, delivering this news, particularly to Ron's two best friends and his sister.

Harry wanted to do violence to her even more than he had wanted to hurt the Ravenclaw girls. But then she went on, making matters even worse.

"I daresay tomorrow, she'll need to go see Madam Pomfrey for some Prophylax--"

"Oh!" Hermione cried, her face horrible to behold. Harry had never seen her look like this. She ran to the portrait hole and was out of the common room before he could think.

SMACK! Harry turned. Ginny had stepped toward Lavender and slapped her across the face. Lavender stared at Ginny in shock, her hand to her cheek. Because of the redness that appeared now where she'd been struck, it suddenly occurred to Harry what a beige person she was; beige hair, beige skin, beige eyes, even. She was so completely ordinary; she could blend into the wallpaper seamlessly in any modern doctor's office. She was so ordinary that that in itself was almost extraordinary. But not quite.

Lavender looked back and forth between Ginny and Harry; she would find no quarter there, she could tell. Finally, she pushed past them and ran up the stairs to her dorm. Harry heard the door slam. Well, she wouldn't be disturbed. Hermione had run off, and Parvati was--Harry swallowed painfully as he remembered--preoccupied. He didn't look at Ginny. He started toward the portrait hole.

"Leave her alone right now," Ginny said suddenly. "Give her time." He looked at her for half a minute, marveling at how she'd grown up, both inside and out. But he didn't agree with her on this.

He shook his head and went through the portrait hole. When he was in the corridor again, he

looked around frantically. Where could she have gone? She had too much of a lead. He could go back for his map--but that was in his dorm. Damn!

He leaned against the wall, then sank down onto his haunches. Maybe Ginny was right; if she wanted to be with someone, she would have waited for me. She needs time. We all need some time...

Harry put his head in his hands, trying not think of Ron and Parvati up in their dorm, and also trying not to think of Hermione thinking of it.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Five

April Fool

On the morning of the ceilidh, Harry and Hermione went running around the Quidditch pitch for the first time in months. Harry was glad spring had finally arrived. Even a brisk highland spring was better than no spring at all. As he and Hermione did their warm-down exercises, he watched her closely. Her face was screwed up in concentration as usual. When they were done, he put his hand on her arm and looked in her eyes.

"Hermione," he said softly. She looked back at him, but it seemed to be through a veil, a transparent wall that was nonetheless a barrier. She was hiding.

"What?"

"Are you okay? About--yesterday. And--and Ron. And Parvati."

She gazed back at him, not speaking. Then she had a smile on her face that looked more unnatural than anything Harry had ever seen.

"Of course I'm okay. It was--a bit of a shock at first. But--well, they're both over the age of consent. She's already sixteen, he'll be sixteen soon. He's still our friend, Harry. Nothing will ever change that." But her voice shook, as though she weren't so sure.

Harry nodded as though he believed her. "I've been thinking, Hermione. Maybe we should tell Ron about us. Before anyone else. I mean, I think it would be pretty awful if he didn't find out until the rest of the world, don't you? He's with someone now..."

Hermione stared into space. When she spoke, Harry got the impression her eyes were actually focused on some spot miles in the distance. "Whatever you say, Harry. That makes sense."

There was silence between them. After a while, pulling idly at some new grass just outside the sandy path, Harry said, "I couldn't believe how angry Ron was about what Niamh said. I never expected it to lead to him and Parvati--"

"What does Niamh have to do with anything?" she said suddenly, looking right at him now. He swallowed, trying to decide how much to tell her.

"She and Padma and Mandy were in the library gossiping. Niamh was telling Padma that Parvati should be careful of Ron, that he was only with her because she was my 'cast-off.' You know, because we went to the Yule Ball. Ron was--not really hacked off, because it was about a thousand times worse. He looked murderous. That's when he went charging up to Gryffindor

Tower." Harry couldn't bring himself to tell her that they'd also already designated Hermione a future Harry Potter cast-off, destined to be inherited by Ron.

Hermione looked more detached and analytical now. She nodded. "He had something to prove."

Not that Parvati seemed to mind, Harry thought. Lavender did say she was dragging him to the stairs...

Hermione seemed calmer, knowing what set Ron off. Harry peered at her again. "And he certainly seemed happy at dinner last night. The last time I saw him looking like that was after Malfoy's performance as the amazing bouncing ferret."

"Yes, he did seem happy," she said absently. She raised her face to Harry, as though she'd just made a resolution. "You know what? I'm happy for him. I really am."

"So am I," Harry said firmly. Did he dare hope that she meant what she said? "We should tell him so," Harry added, standing up and extending a hand to her. She took it and swung herself up.

"Yes. We should," she agreed, then let go of his hand and strode purposefully toward the castle. Harry followed closely behind, wanting to ask her another question, and not daring.

But, Hermione, are you happy for Parvati?

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione went back up to Gryffindor Tower after lunch to change for the ceilidh. Most of the students attending the ceilidh had waited to go; many of those not attending had left for Hogsmeade after breakfast, Ron and Parvati among them. After dressing, Harry met Hermione in the common room.

Upon closer inspection, Harry found that the MacGregor tartan was actually red with very deep green, not black as Sirius had said. There was also a narrow white windowpane check overlaid on the red and green pattern. Harry was wearing a simple white button-down shirt with a deep green waistcoat Sirius had sent, plus a sporran (somewhat like a wallet) hanging in the front of his kilt, and the red and green argyle socks and black ghillie shoes Sirius had also sent. He wore his dirk in a special leather holster around his right calf; his wand was in a long pocket that seemed made just for it on the left side of the front of his kilt, so he could just reach across with his right hand to be armed quickly. Sandy was wrapped around his left upper arm, on top of the thin white shirt, which was slightly open above the waistcoat.

Hermione wore a simple bottle-green dress that swung around her calves and that went perfectly with the deep green in the MacGregor tartan, which was draped artfully around her shoulders and fastened with the brooch that had the crowned lion flanked by the unicorn and stag. Around the lion's head was what looked like a belt with a large buckle, also crafted in silver metal. It bore the clan motto in Gaelic; according to Sirius' letter it meant, "My race is royal." The MacGregors had been Kings of Scotland in an earlier time, and his grandmother's name was in fact King, one of the septs of the Clan MacGregor. Elspeth King had married Henry Potter, and they'd given their son the name of other kings of Scotland, James. What had happened to Elspeth and Henry? he wondered. He knew now about his mother's parents, but what about his father's?

"Do you have your wand?" he asked Hermione softly, as they approached the portrait hole. She surreptitiously pulled back her left sleeve a couple of inches, showing him a clever holster for it that was strapped to her forearm. He nodded and she covered her left arm again. She also had a small wallet that was attached to the belt of her dress, containing the ten Sickles entrance fee to

the ceilidh. His money was in the sporran. They needed to maintain the appearance of going as friends; Harry would have been happy to pay for her, but he knew she was right about this and had not argued.

Harry heard someone else arrive in the common room and turned to see who it was. Neville was ready to go, wearing a kilt with a black and white tartan with some thin red and yellow stripes running through it, a black shirt, black-and-white diamond-patterned socks, a sporran and--Harry noted--a dirk in his sock. If he had his wand, Harry couldn't see it. Ginny also arrived in the common room now, in a black dress with Neville's largely black and white tartan around her shoulders held by a silver brooch for whatever clan Neville was. Her red hair went beautifully with the simple plaid; she had pulled it into one long braid, tied with a black velvet ribbon at the end, tendrils curling around her face. Harry had never seen her look lovelier. Neville appeared to be quite pleased with her himself, smiling broadly at her. She smiled back, unsure. But now the common room was filling with others preparing to go to the ceilidh; George and Angelina in a blue and green tartan with a red and green windowpane overlay; Alicia in a similar blue and green tartan, but with a white and yellow overlay; Dean Thomas in the same tartan as Alicia--were they going together? Harry wondered. But no; Dean had asked Katie, it turned out, who was wearing a very loud tartan of red, green and yellow broad bands, giving the impression where the red and yellow intersected of there being orange blotches scattered on the fabric. Harry winced at the combination. Then He spotted Colin in clan MacGregor, but not before Colin spotted Harry.

"Harry! Is that your family's tartan or Hermione's?"

"Mine," Harry told him.

"That's great! Do you know what that means? We're kinsmen! We're in the same clan! Oh, I cannot believe I'm in the same clan as Harry Potter..."

"Um, who are you going with, Colin?"

Colin looked even more smug now. "I can't believe I got up the nerve; I asked that fifth-year prefect from Ravenclaw. And she said yes! Can you believe it? I was afraid to, since I'm only fourth year, but I guess she really wanted to go, and didn't want to be alone..."

"Mandy's nice," Hermione said, her mouth twisting as she looked at Harry and widened her eyes, silently begging him to agree with her. They would not be guilty of gossip as the Ravenclaws had been.

"Yeah," was Harry's brief answer. He nodded toward the portrait hole. "We should go, don't you think?"

They all tramped out into the corridor and down the stairs to the entrance hall, the other students chatting merrily, the ones meeting dates from other houses running ahead. Harry and Hermione looked at one another apprehensively, thinking about the possibility of a Death Eater strike.

Their first almost-date, and it might turn into a terrorist attack. Oh joy, thought Harry.

In the entrance hall, Colin ran up to Mandy and started talking at her very quickly. Mandy looked like she might like to get a word in edgewise, but Harry felt it was unlikely. Then he saw Alicia go over to--he felt like rubbing his eyes--Draco Malfoy, who was wearing the same blue and green tartan with the yellow and white overlay. So that was clan Campbell, he thought. Malfoy had a black leather sporran, blue and green argyle socks with the requisite dirk, black ghillie shoes very like Harry's, a pristine white shirt with a Campbell tartan four-in-hand necktie, an embroidered green waistcoat and a black velvet jacket with gold braid trim, as well as a tartan tam-o-shanter with green ribbons. Harry smirked; he looked a bit foppish, but in a way,

he could also carry it off. Only Malfoy, he thought.

Malfoy was looking at Alicia in a very admiring way; her dress was rather tight, and it was still easy to see this despite the tartan fabric loosely arranged on her shoulders. Harry looked to see whether Ginny had noticed them. She had; then she caught Harry's eye and looked away, and after that she seemed determined to behave as if Neville were the center of her universe.

Roger Davies also appeared in the entrance hall, in another blue and green kilt, this one with a red windowpane overlay. He didn't appear to have a date; must be meeting Fleur in the village, Harry thought. Blaise Zabini and Niamh Quirke appeared to be partners, in a blue and green tartan with a red and yellow overlay. Hannah and Ernie were going as well, in two different tartans (Ernie's was the same as Katie's), but Fred had asked Susan Bones, and they were wearing the same pattern, which turned out to be the same one that Professor McGonagall was wearing.

She positioned herself next to Harry and Hermione in the throng walking down to the village, speaking softly to them. Hermione looked at the red, white, green and blue tartan around her shoulders (she wore it with her usual robes and pointed hat), saying, "So, is that the clan McGonagall tartan, professor?"

McGonagall frowned. "Heavens, Hermione. I thought you would have realized that there is no clan McGonagall. It is an Irish name. My mother is a MacBean; that is what I am wearing. Note the brooch."

She stopped for a moment so Hermione could look at the silver brooch with a cat surrounded by the sort of belt-with-buckle that seemed to be on all of the clan crests. The motto was in English--almost. "'Touch not the cat bot a glove,'" Hermione read, before they all went on walking. "What does that mean?"

"'Bot' means 'without,'" McGonagall told her. Harry thought it was interesting that there was a cat on the family crest. Do we really choose our Animagus forms? he wondered not for the first time. He remembered how he had felt manipulated by Dumbledore, just a bit, concerning the golden griffin.

Then, looking around the crowd as they approached the outskirts of the town, he realized that Snape wasn't with them. Harry frowned. Maybe he wasn't coming after all. Hermione was talking to McGonagall again.

"Are you--meeting anyone at the ceilidh, professor?" she asked, then colored. The idea of McGonagall having a personal life was frankly disturbing to Harry. He really didn't want to know.

"As a matter of fact, I am. An old friend." Then she leaned in toward the two of them, saying softly, "I understand you both know there could be trouble. You have your wands?" They nodded. "Of course, we're all hoping nothing will happen..."

"Of course, professor," Hermione said to her softly. The three of them turned and surveyed the nearly three-dozen students making their way down the High Street to the hall. Harry, Hermione and McGonagall joined them. Outside the building were large parchments bearing the legend SCREAMING HAGGIS 1996 TOUR and an illustration of a squashed-tomato sort of thing with what looked like tubes emerging from it at several points. It was drawn with a rather cartoonish mouth (no eyes, ears, nose or other features) open very wide in what was, presumably, a scream. Was that supposed to be an oatmeal-stuffed sheep's stomach? Harry wondered. Screaming haggis indeed.

There was something of a bottleneck at the door to the hall as everyone had to pause to pay

their ten Sickles, but as soon as they were inside, they heard the wail of the band warming up; two pipers were on the stage adjusting their holds on their sets of pipes, while a fiddler tuned his instrument and a cellist tuned hers, and the drummer wandered around positioning various types of percussion instruments, some of which bore only a passing resemblance to a drum, Harry felt. The hall was empty in the middle; the seats where they'd sat for the opera had been mostly cleared away, a few left ringing the perimeter. Although it was the middle of the afternoon, the windows of the hall were opaque glass, so hundreds of candles floated overhead, lighting the space.

As the students trickled in, Harry saw that there were also a number of people from the village and possibly elsewhere who had come out for the ceilidh. Then across the room, he saw a tall figure with a red ponytail who smiled with recognition and came striding over to see them, hand extended.

"Harry! Hermione! Good to see you. I just Apparated into the village," Bill Weasley said jovially. Speaking more softly, he said, "Have you seen--Snuffles yet? I'm not clear yet what he's going to look like, are you?" So he also knew Sirius was going to be here, Harry thought. "No sign of him yet," Harry said quietly. Then, in a more normal tone, he said, "Isn't that Black Watch? Is that the Weasley family tartan?"

"Oh, mum and dad aren't a bit Scottish. Snuffles got this for me, to have something to wear." Harry nodded. "He told me we'd be well covered here. How many operatives you figure there will be?"

Bill shrugged. "No idea. Where's Ron?"

"At the Three Broomsticks, probably. He and Parvati didn't want to come."

"Who?"

Harry hesitated. Ron hadn't told anyone at home about having a girlfriend, evidently. And now they'd gotten rather serious very quickly. He suddenly remembered Ron saying at the Christmas party that his mother would kill him if he ever got a girl into 'trouble.' Except that he hadn't finished saying it, stopping with embarrassment. Harry sincerely hoped that Parvati had gone to see Madam Pomfrey.

"Parvati is in our year. Gryffindor. She and Ron are--" Harry paused again, not wanting to spill too much. On the other hand, Bill seemed the least likely person (after the twins) to tell Mrs. Weasley anything about Ron's and Parvati's extra-curricular activities. As the pause lengthened, Bill looked like he comprehended.

"Oh! I see," he said, and Harry thought he really might. Well, that saved him from having to say anything else, thank goodness. Hermione had looked away during this exchange. "Well," Bill went on, "if there's trouble, I'd just as soon not have to worry about another member of my family. I see that George and Fred are here."

"And Ginny came with Neville Longbottom," Hermione said, pointing them out in the crowd. At that moment, Ginny spotted Bill and came over to them.

"Bill! What are you doing here?" she smiled up at him after giving him a hug.

"Ginny! What, are you getting taller again? Didn't I talk to you about that?" He smiled at her, then Harry heard him say softly, "Making sure you're all right."

Ginny bristled, and Bill quickly amended that. "I mean you as in you and Ron and Fred and George. All of you. Dumbledore asked me to. Just a precaution. Charlie and Percy are with Mum and Dad." She looked a little less upset now, but a flush from her initial indignation still showed on her freckled cheeks.

"This is Neville," she said then, realizing that she ought to introduce him to her oldest brother.

"Neville, this is Bill."

They shook hands, each of them looking a little like they were squeezing too hard. Bill smiled.

"Nice to meet you Neville. You know that if you ever hurt my baby sister I will personally kill you." He smiled broadly, having said this in the friendliest voice imaginable. Neville looked at him with his mouth open. Ginny's eyes were wild.

"Bill!"

Now George had come over with Angelina and Fred with Susan Bones. They'd heard what Bill had said. Bill laughed, clapped Neville on the shoulder. Neville winced. "Just kidding, Neville! Just kidding!"

Fred and George looked at Neville very seriously (especially for them). "No he's not," they said in unison.

Neville looked nervously back and forth between Ginny's brothers. Harry remembered what Ron had said about what Ginny would think if he had gone on a date with her and shaken her hand at the end. "What I'd think if you went out with Ginny and did that is that maybe you'd decided you wanted to go on living after all." A girl with six brothers. And Percy and Charlie were no less protective than the others. Talk about having to run a gauntlet.

Just then, a large man with a broad, muscular chest barely contained by his rough-woven shirt leapt up onto the stage before the band. His chestnut hair curled messily on his head, becoming an unruly sort of curly beard and mustache lower on his face. More curly hair showed on his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. He'd rolled up his shirtsleeves to the elbow, revealing strong, sinewy forearms, and his socks covered very muscular legs as well. His kilt was of a complicated, intricate-looking blue and green tartan overlaid with a white windowpane pattern. His sporran looked well-worn, as did his shoes. Harry thought he wore his kilt as though it were an everyday garment, not the costume it was for the rest of them. He wondered briefly whether this meant he wore nothing under it, in the traditional way. Harry knew he would never dare to do that; he hoped no one would be checking.

The large chestnut-haired man helped a handsome middle-aged woman with lustrous brown hair swing up onto the stage beside him. The tartan around her shoulders matched his kilt. Harry turned to Hermione. He'd noticed her looking at Bill's legs when they'd first seen him (Bill had seen her looking and seemed highly amused) and now he saw open admiration in her eyes as she looked at the man on the stage. That's right, Harry remembered. She looks at men's legs. Okay, he thought, there's certainly enough of that available today.

The man on the stage spoke now with a broad Scottish accent. "All right! Wailcome to the Screamin' Haggis tour and to the Hogsmeade ceilidh! Now, since there's sech a number o' ye here from the school, I thought we'd start fairst with a wee dancin' laysson. I'll wager most o' ye have never done this before. I'm Ian Lucas of Clan Lamont, as ye can see, and this here's m' lovely bride o'twenty year, Mary. We'll be demonstratin' some reels and other dances, and you lot'll do what we do. Aye? Are ye up fer it?"

The crowd roared its assent, and Harry began to relax, rotating around the floor with Hermione in his arms, and sometimes other girls, as they switched partners, swinging round by the elbow, then back to the start again. He'd been a bit worried about looking like a fool, but learning the dances first made his fears drop away, and before long his face was actually hurting from laughing and smiling so much, as he whirled Hermione, then Angelina, then Hannah, then a girl he didn't know, then Hermione again...

When the lesson was over, Ian Lucas said, "Aye, that's the stuff. Y'all look ready fer the band! Take a wee break fairst and get some drinks from the bar in the anteroom. Oh, and you young lads and lasses--just butterbeer for ye! Leave the hard stuff to those of us who've already ruined our livers." He smiled and laughed, jumping off the stage, his kilt flying. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked like she was about to choke.

"What is it, Hermione?" he asked, concerned.

"Oh, nothing," she answered, her voice higher than usual. "It's just that--um--"

"What?"

"Well, he, uh, certainly believes in being traditional."

Harry thought for a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he realized what she meant, what she must have seen.

"Hermione!"

"Well, it wasn't like I made him walk over a mirror or anything! I heard that's what they used to make them do in the military."

Harry watched her eyes follow Lucas off the dance floor. He couldn't afford to appear even the slightest bit concerned about where she looked; and actually, he was starting to find it somewhat amusing in a discovering-just-how-libidinous-Hermione-was sort of way. He merely smiled at her now. "Do you want a butterbeer?" he asked, making her jump.

"Oh! Yes, please. I'm already thirsty, just from the lesson."

"Okay, two butterbeers. And--" he took off his waistcoat, "could you find a place for this for me? I'm already too hot to wear it."

Hermione took it and looked at him appreciatively. Harry felt her eyes and smiled back at her, feeling vindicated for not having let it get to him when she'd been looking at Bill Weasley and Ian Lucas.

"You know," he said quietly, "people aren't going to believe we're here as friends if you keep looking at me like that."

"Oh, sod that," she started to say, then sighed and nodded. "All right, all right. But Harry--"

"What?"

"You just--look like you were born to wear that. With just a few more shirt buttons undone, of course."

"Hermione!"

"And there's just one problem when we're dancing..."

"Just one? I felt like I was treading on everyone's toes."

"The one problem is, when I'm dancing with you," she lowered her voice and smiled mischievously, "I can't see your legs."

He laughed. "Well, I'm going over there now to get us some butterbeer, so you can see them the whole time I'm walking there and back."

"You can bet that I'll be looking."

He knew she would. He made his way through the crowd to the bar. But when he returned, he found that she was not in fact ogling his legs. Hermione was with the cellist, who was standing holding her instrument while Hermione spoke very rapidly to her. Then Harry was utterly amazed; Hermione sat down on a chair, took the cello between her legs, touched the strings delicately with her left hand while holding the bow reverently with her right, and began to play. It was a haunting, sad melody that Harry knew he'd heard before. She played only a dozen measures or so, reluctantly standing up and handing the cello back to the witch from the band.

As the cellist returned to the stage, Harry walked over to her in shock, handing her the bottle of butterbeer, which Hermione opened as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He took a drink himself before he said, "Hermione! I didn't know you played the cello!"

She looked at him, smiling mischievously. "There's a lot about me you still don't know, Harry Potter." He smiled back at her; that wasn't a double entendre, not at all. "I used to play before Hogwarts. But it wasn't really feasible to bring it with me to school, so I don't play much any more. When I saw it--I just got nostalgic."

"What were you playing?"

"Bach. Air on the G-String." She looked at his face, then hit his arm playfully. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Harry!" He laughed.

"Oh, think you're psychic now, do you?"

"I think I know how teenage boys think..."

He said softly to her, "And you'd be right." They both laughed guiltily, then tried to sober up as McGonagall walked over to them with her friend. Harry was shocked to see it was a man. He couldn't have been a day under sixty, but Hermione was regarding him with as much appreciation as she had Bill and Lucas and Harry. His salt-and-pepper hair and beard were meticulously groomed, and his hazel eyes looked around the room as though nothing in the farthest corner could escape his notice. Harry didn't know when he'd ever seen anyone who looked so alert. He wore a Campbell kilt.

Suddenly, the man said in a low voice, "So, Potter. What are they charging for the drinks? Double the going rate, I suppose?" The voice was completely unfamiliar, but the tone--

"Is that you, Professor Snape?" Hermione whispered with wide eyes. It was indeed Snape. Harry hadn't realized he wouldn't come as himself. Whose likeness had he borrowed?

"What should we call you?" Harry asked softly while opening his butterbeer.

"Duncan MacDermid. My uncle." Harry nodded. He looked around the hall as people stood in small groups, drinking and talking, waiting for the band to start playing. Was Sirius here yet? he wondered. If so, what did he look like?

But Harry didn't have a chance to wonder at this for long. The fiddle player and cellist started tuning up again, then the pipers. The drummer seated himself on a stool, holding a large drum between his legs. The cellist also sat, but the others all stood. The drummer started by hitting the edge of the drum with his knuckles, producing a hollow, sharp noise. The pipers started the low undertone emanating from their instruments, that drone that was supposed to have driven the enemy to distraction in the days of yore, when pipers led armies into battle. Then it began in earnest, as the pipers started to play a fast, high melody and the cellist produced a kind of basso continuo under the drone, and the fiddle danced an obligato above the pipes. And under it all the persistent whack!whack! of the drum, interspersed now with the softer sounds of the drum being struck in the middle of the taut skin.

Couples started moving onto the dance floor. Lucas and his wife led them all in a lively reel which, as far as Harry could tell, had him dancing with every girl or woman present at some point, as they changed partners and the kilts whirled and feet stomped and laughing, sweaty faces smiled at the strangers they had linked hands with. They were united in the dance, the skirling pipes were in their blood, it mattered not whether a person was actually Scottish.

After a couple of reels and a strathspey, the band quieted a bit and played a lilting waltz; Harry and Hermione danced near Ginny and Neville; Draco Malfoy was also nearby, his arms around Alicia. They actually made a very striking couple, Harry thought. Then he saw that Draco

Malfoy's eyes looked quite alarmed, and Harry twisted his head around to see why. Lucius Malfoy had entered the hall, resplendent in his clan Campbell kilt with all the trappings, escorting his wife, who wore a sweeping dress and the tartan around her shoulders, the clan crest brooch on her shoulder glittering in the candlelight. Seeing him now made Harry remember seeing him in the Pensieve, in his twenties, recruiting Snape. Snape was probably right not to come as himself, Harry thought.

He looked back at Draco Malfoy and Alicia. Upon seeing his father at the entrance to the hall, he dutifully left the dance floor, taking Alicia with him. Harry managed to dance Hermione over near the door, so they could hear what was going on.

"Father! Mother! I didn't expect to see you here," Draco Malfoy said to his parents; he didn't sound like it was a pleasant surprise. "This is Alicia Spinnet," he introduced her to them. Alicia smiled charmingly, but this was met with a cold, icy stare from Lucius Malfoy.

"Spinnet?" the elder Malfoy said suspiciously.

"She's Head Girl," his son said helpfully; he sounded just a bit like he was bragging. Harry wondered how many Alicia-on-a-horse fantasies had gone through his head since he'd met her in the entrance hall at the school.

"Yes, I knew that," he said, still somewhat grumpy. "But your parents--they're Muggles, aren't they?"

Alicia swallowed and looked at her date. "Yes, sir," she said timidly. It was a good trick to rattle Alicia, Harry thought, but he certainly didn't admire Lucius Malfoy for it. Quite the opposite.

Harry whispered in Hermione's ear; she nodded and let go of him, and they walked over to the Malfoys.

Lucius Malfoy was saying rudely, "I can't believe they couldn't find any pure-bloods to be Head Gi--"

"Hello, again, Mr. Malfoy. Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said in a rather loud voice. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if I might dance with Alicia? You won't be without a partner; Hermione doesn't mind dancing with you, do you Hermione?"

She smiled at Harry. "Not at all." Draco Malfoy, confused, tucked her arm in his, preparing to return to the dance floor. Before that, though, Hermione turned to his parents, smiling brightly and saying, "My parents are dentists."

Harry tried not to laugh at the thunderous look on Lucius Malfoy's face as Harry moved in circles holding Alicia. She looked relieved to be away from the Malfoys.

"So. You came with Malfoy," he said to her while they danced. She looked up at him, reminding him very much of that awkward moment in the Quidditch changing room.

"Why do you care?"

"It's just that--I'm surprised. Because he knows how his father feels about Muggle-borns. This almost amounts to a rebellion, for him."

Alicia looked over at Draco Malfoy's parents, who were socializing with some other older witches and wizards who were not dancing. Then Harry glanced at Hermione, who had managed to steer Draco Malfoy over to where Neville and Ginny were dancing. She separated herself from Malfoy and said something he couldn't hear to Neville and Ginny. Then the dancing couples were different again, Neville holding Hermione, not looking altogether disappointed, and Draco Malfoy holding Ginny, who was blushing into her hair. Harry frowned; she needed to stop being so transparent. He looked at the elder Malfoys again. He thought it was possible that

Lucius Malfoy would rather his son were with a Muggle-born girl than a Weasley.

When the song ended, the band segued seamlessly into a different waltz, so the couples continued dancing. Harry looked about the room over Alicia's head, still trying to figure out where Sirius was. He saw Roger dancing with Fleur, Fred with Susan Bones, George with Angelina, Bill with a witch he didn't know. Then he realized that Bill, Fred and George were looking very agitated about Ginny's dance partner. Her partner had also noticed.

Ginny and Draco Malfoy worked their way over to Harry and Alicia. After a few moments of dancing next to each other, Malfoy stood still, taking his arms from around Ginny.

"If you don't mind, Potter, I think I'd like my date back."

Harry stepped back from Alicia, thanking her for the dance, and then he realized, I'm dancing with Ginny now. He took her in his arms; he had very little choice but to look in her face, since she was so tall, unlike Alicia. He swallowed, trying not to think about how it felt to hold her, his hand at her waist, his other hand wrapped around hers, her long fingers lightly wrapped around his shoulder. She looked at him, too. Her gaze was impassive. Harry again found that he had a hard time looking away from her. But something was bothering him.

"So," he said, trying to make small talk. "What tartan is that?"

"Neville's gran was named Gillespie, which is clan MacPherson." They danced in silence for a few minutes. Then Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"Ginny," he said softly. "Are you mad at me?"

She opened her mouth in surprise, then closed it quickly. "Harry, of course not. Why are you saying that?"

"Well, it just seems like when you look at me--I don't know. You probably just have a lot on your mind, I suppose." He made an excuse for her so she didn't have to do it herself. But he wasn't convinced. She looked down.

"Harry, I--I haven't been very honest with you and I just thought that if we actually spent much time talking, I would be."

Harry frowned. "What? You say that like it would be a bad thing to be honest with me."

She also frowned. "It would be. Because--because I've been helping Draco. With his plans to expose his father. And you're not supposed to know what they are. And I--I keep wanting to tell you, but I know I shouldn't--" she trailed off. Oh, thought Harry. That explained so much.

"So," he said softly, "do you know who sent the school owls?"

Her face looked blank. "What school owls?"

Harry frowned again. "Never mind. I'm relieved to know you're not mad at me, that's all.

When Will was so great and then all the other Gryffindors stood up with me, you wouldn't come near me, and I thought you thought--that I'd done it. To Flitwick and Cho."

She nodded. "I see. No, Harry, I can honestly say that I never once thought you did anything to Professor Flitwick or Cho Chang."

He looked at her face, so close to his as they danced. Her eyes still looked very sad. "Ginny, I have to say, you don't exactly look happy."

She looked directly into Harry's eyes now. "Why should I be? Sneaking around because I'm afraid everyone will hit the roof when they find out about me and Draco, worrying about him, worrying about getting his father away from him so he can't hurt him anymore...and worrying about Ron, and--and you--" She looked down and away. She worried about him? he thought, feeling a warmth inside his chest, trying not to smile, since she still looked pretty miserable.

"You sound like you're under a lot of stress," he told her. She nodded in agreement.

"I'll just be glad when all this is over..."

The song ended and they separated, clapped with the rest of the crowd. The band struck up another fast tune. She went to look for Neville and Harry moved to the perimeter of the hall, where Snape was standing, looking like his uncle. He was talking to Ian Lucas, or rather, Lucas was talking at him jovially, while Snape looked rather miffed. Somehow, his trademark sneer managed to penetrate his uncle's features. They both took swigs from hip flasks, Snape's a shining silver, Lucas' a dirty leather-encased specimen.

"So!" Lucas said, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Ye're Harry Potter!" Harry smiled feebly and nodded at him. He looked for Hermione on the dance floor; she was swinging arms with Bill. He nodded at her and she nodded back, her face flushed with the dancing. He turned to Lucas.

"I'm glad we had a chance to learn the dances first--" he started to say to Lucas, who slapped him on the back hard, so that Harry almost lost his glasses. He pushed them up his nose and tried to stand upright again.

"I noticed ye're wearin' clan MacGregor. Ye know, don't ye, that clan Lamont and clan MacGregor are forever linked, don't ye?"

"No, I don't really know anything about--"

"Wail--" Lucas began, ignoring Harry, still grasping his shoulder. "Ye see, a long time ago there was a wizard o' clan Lamont who was travelin' through the MacGregors' country an' stopped at an inn fer the night. Now, doonstairs in the pub, he and the other men praysent got to drinkin' quite a lot, and Lamont kilt none other than the son of MacGregor of Glenstrae, head of the clan, whilst tryin' t' disarm him. When he flew back'ard, 'e struck 'is 'ead on a pike in the wall. Wen' right through 'is brain. No magic can revairse that. 'Course, now mos' books about clans say 'twas 'is dirk. Wail, 'e hightailed it outa there faster'n a jackrabbit in heat! Wen' over the moors, with the mob from the pub hot on his tail. Prob'ly all too shitfaced to Apparate withou' splinchin' themselves.

"Now, in those days, people still held great store in the code of hospitality o' the Highlands. If a stranger is at yer door askin' for sanctuary and succor, ye give it, no quaystions askit. Ye don' tell yer name and ye don' ask 'is, in case it tairns out yer enemies. So this Lamont comes to a hoose and says t'the man standing in the door that he's slain a man, save 'im from the death which now pursues'im. The man takes pity on 'im and takes 'im in, tells 'im 'e'll always be safe under 'is roof. Wail, no more'n a few minutes passed when the mob from the pub is at the door, askin' whayther MacGregor's seen the fugitive, tellin'im, 'That's the man kilt yer son!'"

Harry looked at Lucas shrewdly; what was he up to? he wondered. Making friends by telling Harry that one of his ancestors killed one of Harry's?

"Wail," Lucas went on, "MacGregor stands there weepin' over 'is son, but 'e tells'em they mayen't have the man; he'd asked fer sanctuary and received it, and they wasn't to harm a hair on 'is head. 'E even gave 'im safe passage to 'is 'omeland. Later on, durin' the great proscription against the MacGregors, they wasn't to use the MacGregor name nor wear the tartan, and the Camerons and Campbells--" he gave Snape a hard glare "--were gettin' rewarded fer going out and killin' as many MacGregors as they could find. Any man who kilt a MacGregor was held scaithless; he wasn't punished, but actually rewarded! And the MacPhersons fought with'em against the Camerons, but it was the Lamonts who gave 'em sanctuary, who gave'em succor, because of the MacGregor who protected his own son's killer."

Lucas looked at him closely and then Harry opened his eyes wide.

"Snuffles?" he said softly. Lucas grinned widely.

"Aye, there's some'at call me that." Then he spoke lowly to Harry without the broad accent.

"How are you Harry? Have you seen anything suspicious?" The bagpipes were so loud now that Harry had to lean in to hear him.

"No. Who--whose body are you in?"

"The name really is Ian Lucas. Cousin of mine. And that's not really his wife; that's Arabella, another operative. I am actually clan Lamont. Black is one of the Lamont septs. And, see there?" He pointed to a man across the room also wearing the MacGregor tartan. "Mundungus Fletcher. Another operative. Plus Remus and Moody are at the pub. Going to meet them later to regroup."

Harry looked onto the dance floor, seeing Arabella/Mary Lucas dancing with a man he thought he'd seen in the pub. He turned back to Sirius.

"Why did you tell me that story? Is it true?"

"Yes."

"And--and is that what you think I did? Took in my parents' murderer? Because I do not blame you for--"

"Harry." Sirius looked at him levelly. "Do you blame yourself for what happened to Cedric Diggory?"

Harry didn't answer him for a good long minute; they just looked at each other. "Yes," he finally said.

"Then I don't have to tell you, do I?"

Harry grimaced; no, he didn't have to tell him how consuming guilt could be. How ironic that history seemed to be repeating itself, though. A Lamont kills a MacGregor, receives shelter and forgiveness, and in turn protects the MacGregors when they are in need. And the Campbells were enemies of both clans...

"Does--does your cousin really talk like that?"

Sirius made a face. "He'd probably say I'm overdoing the accent. But there's people here who've met him; I need for them to think I really am him."

Harry's mouth felt dry. He eyed Sirius' flask. "I don't suppose there's any hope of that being nonalcoholic--" he started to say, but Sirius pulled it closer to him.

"Polyjuice Potion!" he said softly. "And that was the last drop. Soon I'll have to go." Harry stopped; of course. The ceilidh was certainly going to be longer than an hour; it was actually getting to be quite late in the afternoon.

Suddenly a great whoop! went up from somewhere and the middle of the floor cleared; the band started up "All the Bluebonnets Over the Boarder," the swords went down, and a wizard enchanted them so that human hands didn't have to hold them; they moved of their own accord. Lucius Malfoy led the way now, picking his way through them expertly, and Draco Malfoy joined him in the sword dance. Snape-as-MacDermid looked resigned and joined his kinsmen as they skillfully avoided the sharp edges of the swords and held their hands over their heads. Draco Malfoy had taken off his jacket, waistcoat and necktie and unbuttoned his shirt a little, but left his cuffs securely fastened at the wrist. Harry looked at Ginny standing only about ten feet away. Harry ached, seeing how she gazed at him. Her fifteenth birthday was just over a week away.

Hermione had come to stand with him. Harry turned away from the sword dancers to tell her

that Lucas was actually Sirius. She immediately reddened and looked away from him upon learning this.

"What's with her?" Sirius wanted to know.

"Um," Harry stalled. "Long story."

Sirius shrugged. He looked around the hall, at the crowd watching the sword dancing, some more wizards joining in. Sirius frowned.

"I don't understand. There are people here I'd bet my life were Death Eaters--and not just Lucius Malfoy. Yet they're not making any trouble. Either we were given bad intelligence again, or--

The building suddenly shook with a large crash. The band stopped playing and everyone looked around, bewildered. The hovering swords clattered to the floor. Harry went running to the anteroom at the entrance to the hall, then outside, Hermione and Sirius right behind him. Further down the High Street, he could see smoke and flames coming from the direction of the Three Broomsticks.

Ron and Parvati were at the Three Broomsticks.

Harry ran toward the mayhem without thought; he had hoped that he could be prepared; he'd worn Sandy, who was too far away from the pub to be able to see this coming; he'd brought his knife from Sirius, he had his wand. And still it had done no good.

As he reached the smoking ruins of the pub, he heard someone say, "MORSMORDRE!" in a shaking voice, and the Dark Mark flew up into the sky over the rubble. Harry ran in the direction of the voice. Around the corner of the next building, he saw him; a tall wizard in a hooded cloak, a mask on. He jerked around upon seeing Harry; the mask kept Harry from seeing his expression. He tried to move quickly, tried not to be distracted by not knowing who this was.

"Stupefy!" he cried, pointing his wand at the wizard before he could Disapparate. The stunned wizard fell to the ground. A moment later, Harry heard someone else growl the stunning curse, and he turned to see who was trying to attack him.

But it wasn't him they were putting the curse on; he saw Mad-Eye Moody with his wand pointed at another hooded, cloaked and masked Death Eater who had been coming up behind Harry. Remus Lupin was with him. Moody used his wand to move his stunned prisoner over near the man Harry had laid out. He grunted and kicked his man with his wooden leg absently. "Hmph! He sent amateurs. Or they're out of practice. Not to mention they think we're stupid. Good job, by the way, Potter. You got here fast."

Harry looked at him in amazement. "You--you did too."

Moody shook his head. "Nah. We were in the pub." Oh, that's right, Harry thought. "But I saw these two through the back wall, figured out what they were up to."

"Alastor and I quickly put cushioning charms over the entire pub, so that anything falling would go down slowly and softly," Lupin said. "We'll still have to move this rubble out of the way--"

--bloody pain in the ass--" Moody interjected.

--but the people underneath shouldn't be injured," Lupin continued. "C'mon. How are you at levitation charms?"

"Not as good as Hermione, but she's coming now." Lupin nodded.

Harry saw Hermione coming down the High Street with Bill, Sirius, Snape, McGonagall and Arabella, as well as a number of other people who'd been at the ceilidh. Suddenly, Arabella stopped; Harry stared. Her hair was changing color, and her face. She put her hands up to her

face, held a strand of hair before her eyes, then turned and ran the other way down the High Street. Her potion must have worn off, Harry thought. But as her face was changing, something about her seemed familiar...

Moody watched over the stunned Death Eaters while Lupin and Harry went to meet the approaching crowd. Harry went to Sirius and Snape before Hermione. "Moody and I stunned the Death Eaters who did this. He's with them behind that shed there," he pointed and they strode over in the direction he and Lupin had come from.

Hermione had tears running down her face, and Bill had frantically started waving his wand, first producing a stream of water to extinguish some flames licking at the fallen wood, then levitating the chunks of pub up and away from the site of the magical explosion. Harry tried to reassure both of them by telling them about Moody's and Lupin's cushioning charm, but it was still slow going to move so much debris.

Suddenly, Harry heard seven loud pops! near him and he looked up to see Dobby and Biddy and the other free elves. "Harry Potter!" Dobby cried. "What is happening? We is having a picnic outside the village for our day out, and we is hearing a big boom! What is happened to the pub?"

Harry looked at his little wrinkled face grimly. "Death Eaters," he said simply. Dobby nodded. "We is here to help, Harry Potter. Tell us what to do."

Harry looked at him gratefully. "Well, you're pretty good at hover charms. We need to move all this mess and find all of the people who were in the pub when it went."

Dobby gave him a kind of salute, and before long, the house elves were doubling the speed at which they were able to remove the broken beams and other building fragments. They found students, shocked that they weren't gravely injured, feeling their arms and legs just to be sure they weren't mistaken. They found professors, people from the village, a few witches and wizards who'd just Apparated in for the day. Just when Harry was starting to think that Ron and Parvati had already left the pub before the explosion, Hermione and Quiff the house elf moved a large beam and saw Parvati's face, sprinkled with plaster dust, and she called Harry over so they could move some other pieces of furniture and building off her. When she was no longer trapped, Hermione pulled her to a standing position and then threw her arms around her in a thorough hug. Harry saw her shocked face over Hermione's shoulder, as she slowly returned the hug. Then Hermione held her at arms' length.

"Are you all right, Parvati?" Somehow her question seemed to have nothing to do with what had happened to the Three Broomsticks.

Parvati nodded. "I--I thought you might hate me now, Hermione..." she said softly, tears starting to roll down her dusty cheeks. Hermione smiled at her through her own tears.

"No. How could I? We've been roommates for--what? Five years? And--and Ron is one of my best friends. I want him to be happy."

Parvati looked like she might really bawl now; she seemed incredibly touched. Harry looked at the ruins of the pub; there was nothing like a disaster to bring people together who might otherwise be trying to tear each other apart, he thought. But they had yet to find Ron.

"Potter!" a familiar voice called. Most of the people from the ceilidh were on site now, moving rubble and helping the various pub patrons to their feet. But apparently, Moody and Lupin had missed a part of the pub with the cushioning charms. Harry ran toward the voice; it was Draco Malfoy, who was moving piece after piece of shattered wood rafter and chunks of plaster still embedded in thin wooden lath strips. He had uncovered Ron's ashen face. Harry cursed and

put his wand away; he couldn't think about magic now. He felt as he had when Dick had had his leg crushed by the rocks in the Dursley's garden. He lifted the chunks of building from Ron and hurled them away, and Malfoy did the same, also not using his wand. Harry didn't see Lucius Malfoy anywhere. Of course, he'd been dancing in the middle of the hall when the explosion had occurred; dozens of people were watching him. An ironclad alibi.

He and Malfoy worked side by side to free Ron, then each took an arm to try to draw him out of the rest of the rubble. They dragged him clear, laying him flat on the High Street, where there was no debris to get in the way. Harry took out his wand again to do a rejuvenation charm, but Malfoy waved him away. Instead, he took out a hip flask and held up Ron's head, tilted the flask so some of its contents would run into Ron's mouth. Harry was about to yell, but then realized that of course Malfoy didn't have Polyjuice Potion in his flask.

Ron immediately started to cough, and Malfoy sat him up more, slapping his back. Ron opened his eyes, staring wildly at Malfoy and then Harry, then back at Malfoy. He nodded at the flask and Malfoy handed it to him again, and this time Ron took a long swig, his head tilted back. When he was done, he handed it back to Malfoy, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, saying hoarsely, "Thanks."

Harry crouched by his side. "Where were you Ron? Moody said he saw two Dark wizards skulking around, and he and Lupin put a cushioning charm on the pub to keep falling debris from hurting people. But they must have missed wherever you were."

Ron swallowed, looking flushed now after his drink. "I was in the corridor on the way to the loo. Then everything just--fell apart."

Malfoy smirked. "In the corridor, eh? Well, you're lucky you weren't already in there, busy relieving yourself..."

"Enough, Malfoy!" Harry hissed at him. Malfoy smiled benignly at him, and to his surprise, Ron laughed.

"It's okay, Harry. You think that didn't cross my mind? I could use a laugh anyway. Oh, and thanks for the drink, Malfoy."

The two of them helped Ron to his feet; he was several inches taller than both of them, so he was able to lean on their shoulders for support, as though they were live crutches. He could walk, but Harry could tell that he felt very weak. He had a dark bruise on his temple and a deep gash going from his right ear to the corner of his mouth, plaster dust sticking liberally in the blood. He would need attention soon to fix that, Harry thought, or else he'd have a scar.

Then Ginny was running toward them, throwing her arms around Ron and weeping, followed by Bill and Fred and George putting their hands on his shoulder, looking concerned. Then Harry saw her approaching, walking next to Parvati, saw the raw emotion on her face. She started moving faster, then she was running, and Harry thought she would knock him over with the force of her embrace.

Hermione threw her arms around Ron, sobbing, and he gathered her to him, looking like this was why he was glad not to be dead. He put his cheek on her hair and now there was blood and plaster dust on the top of her head. Bill looked fascinated; Parvati did not look happy. She pulled back from Ron, crying freely. "You're all right. You're--" she choked and couldn't speak for a second. He smiled down at her, his arms still around her. Harry felt tears prickle against his eyelids. He was standing so close to them; he could see the look in both of their eyes. But now Hermione was mastering herself again.

She cleared her throat and said softly, "I talked to Parvati. I'm--I'm very happy for you both.

I--I just want you to be happy. You're my best friend," she finished, looking up at him. But now, the happiness that had glowed in Ron's eyes when she had flung her arms around him evaporated. He swallowed and looked over at Parvati, who was walking toward him shakily. Hermione backed up some more and let Parvati come forward and put her arms around Ron, pillowing her head on his chest. Ron looked over her head at Hermione. Harry could see that he didn't want her to be noble about this. He wanted the Hermione to return who had flung her arms around him, who had given him that look. Not this detached friend, putting his girlfriend into his arms.

Suddenly, Rosmerta came up to them, covered in more plaster dust, her hair and eyes wild, holding Pinny and Zenana by their ears. She thrust them at Harry as though they were pieces of dirty laundry.

"Are these yours?" she demanded shrilly. "I thought I told you to keep those things out of my pub! Now look at it!"

Moody had come around the corner from where the stunned bodies were. "Rosmerta, leave the damn elves out of this. They didn't do anything except help get humans out of the wreckage. This was the work of Death Eaters. Who will be punished."

But now Rosmerta was staring at Sirius, who no longer looked like Ian Lucas. Her mouth was open. Harry swallowed. "Sirius Black!" she screamed. "It was Sirius Black! Get him!"

Harry's heart was in his throat; he looked at Draco Malfoy, who goggled at Sirius. Everyone froze except Sirius, who, realizing that he looked like himself again, ran behind the shed where the bodies were. No one else moved; Rosmerta tried to follow him, but then a large black dog came from the direction Sirius had gone, getting in her way. She ignored the dog; after it was gone she rushed behind the shed, then emerged again, looking at them all wildly. "Where is he? It was Sirius Black, I tell you! If anyone blew up my pub, he did!"

They all looked at her as if she were unbalanced, except for Draco Malfoy who was still clearly in shock. She looked from face to face, her mouth hanging open. "But you all saw! He was here!"

Harry heard a familiar voice say, "Mobicorpi!" and Snape came around the corner looking like himself (except for the fact that he didn't normally wear a kilt). The stunned bodies of the Death Eaters accompanied him, floating.

"I'm afraid, Madam Rosmerta, that these two men are the ones who destroyed your establishment," he said, sounding even more oily than usual, Harry thought. Now he removed the mask from the first one. "Ah, Nott," he said, upon seeing his face.

He removed the other man's mask and Moody grunted, saying, "Avery. Well, that explains the incompetence. Not that we're not grateful for it."

But Madam Rosmerta wasn't done pointing fingers. "And you!" she said, seeing Lupin. "I don't want your kind in my pub either! Filthy werewolf..."

Moody looked like he wanted to put a good hex on her. "Shut it, you! You didn't mind him being in the damn pub when he was paying you good money for your overpriced drinks!

Well--" he said, waving his arm over the pile of rubble that used to be the Three Broomsticks.

"You can ban anyone you want from your bloody pub now. Feel free."

She looked at him with raging eyes, then turned and stalked off. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, wondering, but then Sandy distracted him, saying, "A large black dog awaits." Good, thought Harry; Sirius wasn't totally gone. He wanted to talk to him. It was such a shock to turn and see his real face. Would Rosmerta alert the Ministry of Magic? And what about Malfoy?

Harry could tell that Dumbledore must have filled in Moody about Sirius. Perhaps Moody could allay any fears at the Ministry about Sirius having been in Hogsmeade.

Moody came to him now, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "You all right, Potter?"

They all started walking slowly down the street and in the direction of Hogwarts. "No," Harry told him truthfully as they walked. He looked over at where Neville and Ginny and Hermione were walking, then at Ron and Parvati. "I feel like I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, like I'm becoming a bit paranoid." He could have bitten his tongue as soon as he said it; Moody had a reputation for being the most paranoid person in the wizarding world.

Moody laughed now. "Potter, if someone really *is* out to get you--then it's not paranoia. It's called facing facts. And hopefully, being prepared." He smiled at Harry, but Harry had to look away. He could not take Moody smiling at him. It just looked too strange.

He glanced at Draco Malfoy, who was walking near Snape, giving him a strange look through narrowed eyes; would he catch on to the fact that he hadn't seen Snape at the ceilidh, yet here he was, walking along in a kilt as if this were how he always went to Hogsmeade? Harry thought about Malfoy also seeing Sirius. Would he put two and two together about the large black dog?

Then Harry put his hand to the back of his neck; it was as though he could feel someone looking at him. He stopped, making Neville plow into him. He mumbled an apology, then went to the side of the road and started walking back toward the village, until he was clear of the somber parade of Hogwarts students and teachers returning to the castle, many of them limping and dusty from the pub explosion.

Standing alone at the edge of the village, staring at Harry, was Lucius Malfoy. Harry stood in the middle of the road, glaring back at him. The elder Malfoy looked every bit the aristocrat, every piece of metal on his ensemble glittering; he looked at Harry like a lord who was sure of obeisance.

Harry both feared and hated this man and wondered what he was up to, what Draco Malfoy knew, what Ginny knew. He felt he understood more about the son every time he saw the father; how could you not develop a thick skin when your own father thought nothing of torturing you?

Harry continued to gaze at the man who had spawned Draco Malfoy. He would not back down. The tall, pale-haired figure gazed back impassively, minute after minute. Harry did not waver; he felt he could wait all day.

Finally, Malfoy pulled out his wand. Harry quickly pulled out his too, a defensive reflex. But before he knew it, Lucius Malfoy was gone; he had merely been preparing to Apparate. He had presumably returned to Malfoy Manor. Harry continued looking at the space where he'd been; it was right at the edge of the village. He wouldn't have been able to Apparate if he'd been any closer to Hogwarts. Harry finally turned and ran to catch up with the others, still clutching his wand.

* * * * *

"Surprise! Happy Birthday!"

Ginny leaned against the doorway to Hagrid's hut in shock, staring around at her friends, laughing and putting her hand to her chest. When she'd recovered, she shook her finger at Zoey Russell, one of her roommates, who was looking sheepish.

"Oh, you! I told you I didn't want anyone making a big deal--"

"Now, Ginny," Hermione cut in. "Don't blame Zoey. You've been doing so much for other

people, I thought you should have a nice little party too. Zoey, Annika and Ruth just helped get you down here." Before Ginny had arrived, Hermione told Harry that Ginny had been told there was extra work they all needed to do for Hagrid's class. Hermione smiled at Ginny's fellow fourth-year Gryffindors. There were more than seventeen people crammed into Hagrid's very modestly-sized hut, and Ginny registered this.

"Little, Hermione? I think it stopped being little long before I got here."

"No problem!" Fred said. He and George levitated Hagrid's large table out the door and into the front garden, then magically stretched it by a couple more feet. Harry and Ron and Colin moved all of the seating outside that Hagrid possessed, and Angelina and Parvati conjured up some more seats to provide a place for everyone.

Soon Ginny was in a place of honor at the head of the table, opening presents. George's and Fred's gift was first. She unwrapped a large box that turned out to be chocolates. She smiled and thanked them, and started to pass it around the table. Everyone present looked alarmed as it approached them and hastily sent it on its way, until it got to Neville. He casually picked up a light-brown chocolate and bit into it. Everyone stared. Nothing happened. Ginny laughed, looking at the twins.

"Oh! That's the joke, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with them!"

George and Fred smiled, looking at Neville mischievously, saying "April Fool!" But Harry thought, No, that's not it. It's coming...wait, just wait...

And yet, Neville was still fine. He shrugged and took another chocolate out of the box, put it on his plate. No one else would have anything to do with the sweets. Ginny moved on to her other presents. She exclaimed over everything and thanked each person or group of people who'd gone in on a present. Then she reached for Harry's gift. She tore off the paper and looked at the framed photo.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Colin; it's another one of yours, isn't it?"

Colin smiled bashfully; he was really getting to be quite the popular photographer. Harry had chosen a shot of Ginny flying around the Quidditch pitch holding the Snitch at the end of the Gryffindor/Slytherin game. Her hair moved in the breeze in the photo, her robes flapped behind her, her face glowed. She smiled at Harry, looking like she was suppressing a reaction that might be too extreme.

"Thank you, Harry," she said levelly, completely in control. Then there was one gift left. She frowned around the table; Harry could tell she thought she'd opened gifts from everyone already. Who could this be from?

She opened it. A lovely silver barrette was nestled in a tortoise-shell box, cushioned in velvet. It looked heavy and solid, and it was etched with a detailed image of a dragon. A Welsh Green, by the look of it, Harry thought. He grimaced to himself; no need to wonder who that was from. He could tell from her blush that she knew too, but she took a note from the tortoise-shell box and read it, then stuffed it into her pocket. She closed the box with the barrette and looked up at them all.

"Well! Thank you again, everyone. This was really lovely," and she rose to go. Hagrid patted her shoulder; since it was Hagrid, this was the same as shoving her back into her seat rather violently, although they were all used to Hagrid not knowing his own strength and she merely winced.

"Ye can' go yet! There's cake still!"

Uh-oh, thought Harry. He hoped Hermione didn't let Hagrid bake the cake. But she was

emerging from the hut now, carrying a chocolate confection that looked more likely to be a product of the house elves in the kitchens. Hagrid had made tea, which was fine--he couldn't botch that. But the moment that Neville took a sip of tea, he sprouted a duck bill and white feathers and started quacking excitedly; apparently the chocolates were designed to be triggered by tea.

Fred and George were laughing fit to kill, and Ginny was trying to say, "Fred, George--I mean, Fred, George--" but she was laughing too hysterically to be coherent, and even Neville seemed to be enjoying himself until he molted and the duck bill suddenly dropped off into his cake.

"They're called Ducky Dreams," George told them all.

"No, they're not, they're called Drake Dreams," Fred insisted. Hermione frowned.

"That rhymes with Canary Creams. Is your whole product line going to rhyme?" she asked them. They looked somewhat abashed as they admitted that this was in fact their plan.

"What's next?" Ron wanted to know. "There aren't that many words that rhyme with 'cream.' There's only beam and ream and--" he faltered.

"Team," Angelina said laughing.

"Gleam!" Katie said triumphantly. They were all laughing hysterically, suggesting ways that Fred and George could create ridiculous confections with these words in the names, and what they might do to those who dared to eat them.

After they calmed down again, they were actually able to eat the birthday cake and have some tea, many of them taking seconds on the cake, which was chocolate with raspberry filling.

They'd probably all ruined their dinners.

Harry was sitting with Hermione and the other fourth-year girls, whom he did not know very well. He got the impression that when they were in the common room, they were avoiding him. He was finding it hard to talk to Annika Olafsdottir now.

"Can you pass the cream, Annika?" he asked her.

She swallowed, handing him the small chipped jug. After he'd poured it into his tea, he tried to hand it back to her, but she wouldn't take it, so he tried handing it to Ruth Pelta instead. She took it cautiously.

"It's okay," he told them. "I don't bite. Not usually." He smiled at them. Annika laughed now, coloring.

"I'm--I'm sorry. It's just that I still can't get over you being you. I've been in Gryffindor for almost four years, and I'm still unable to say anything coherent to Harry Potter..."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Annika, he does not want to feel like he's on display all the time. He probably just wants to be left alone."

Harry looked at Ruth; she was a brown-haired girl with hazel eyes and a slightly olive complexion.

"Is that why you never talk to me?" he asked her.

She raised her eyebrows. "I just thought you'd think it rude, someone who didn't know you just walking up to you as if just because you're famous and everyone knows who you are, you want to know everyone else. I didn't want to be presumptuous."

Harry nodded at Ruth. "Thank you. But you have no idea the level of presumptuousness that's been reached around here..." he smiled, remembering all of the girls who asked him to the ceilidh. Ruth didn't look away from him; she was a very direct person.

"Well, I should go soon so I can study a little before dinner. My mum sent me another Hebrew lesson by owl post; hopefully I can finally have my bat mitzvah this summer..."

Hermione looked at her. "Seriously?"

She sighed. "I'm two years behind because ever since I came to Hogwarts, I've been doing it by correspondence. My mum and dad are both rabbis. They weren't even sure they were going to let me come to Hogwarts when I got the letter. But my mum decided to be very philosophical about it, finally. Said that I had a gift; it would be rude to throw it back in God's face. The important thing is what you do with your gifts. And now, I'm the only one in Ancient Runes who can make head or tail of the Hebrew and Aramaic spells, so I'm one up on everyone else."

Hermione looked envious.

Then Harry was startled by Sandy hissing at him; he listened, thinking, Not again....No one but Hermione seemed to have noticed Sandy's hissing; he thought she might be paying special attention, listening for the sound, now that she knew about Sandy's Sight. She raised her eyebrows at him, but he shook his head; it wasn't a good time to say anything. Not that he wanted to tell her about this, anyway.

"I can't even make out the Icelandic runes, and my dad's from there," Annika said dejectedly.

"I think that's psychological," Ruth told her, sounding like Hermione to Harry. "You don't get on with your dad, so you don't want anything to do with his heritage."

"Well how would you feel if your dad had saddled you with a last name like 'Olafsdottir?'"

Hermione smiled; Harry had heard her go on about her first name enough times. Ruth rose to go, and Annika and Zoey went with her. They all wished Ginny a happy birthday again before going up to the castle together, walking closely together. Annika shyly waved at Harry before leaving. He thought they made a rather tight little group; hard for Ginny to really penetrate. But then, he realized, she was used to boys. With six brothers, she'd never really learned how to get on with girls. And in her first year, she'd been rather isolated as well. She had spent her time confiding in Tom Riddle, in the diary, not bonding with her roommates. She was still not really integrated into their world; Harry remembered the many times he'd seen small knots of friends scattered around the common room, chatting happily, and Ginny, alone in a corner with a book. That's probably why she's at the top of her classes, he thought. No social life to distract her. That's probably also why she and Malfoy get on, he realized. Two isolated, lonely people...

Harry finished his cake and looked up to see Ginny furtively edging her way toward Hagrid's hut. The rest of the people at the table were chatting animatedly and eating cake and drinking tea and making up silly names for Fred's and George's product line; no one but Harry noticed that the birthday girl was slipping away. Of course, he knew to expect it, thanks to Sandy.

After she'd been gone for several minutes, Harry also slowly rose and edged toward the door of the hut. Hermione was talking to Neville now about what it had felt like to change into the duck. Harry thought it was possible that Parvati saw him, but he blinked and it seemed she was once more laughing at something Fred was saying, while Ron draped his arm over the back of her chair. While Neville was talking to her, Hermione was looking at Parvati strangely; it wasn't hostile, Harry thought, but...at least she's not taking any notice of what I'm doing, he thought. He slipped into Hagrid's hut.

He looked around the strangely empty room; without the large table in it, it actually seemed quite commodious. Then he heard voices, and he moved carefully across the room to the back wall. One of the windows flanking the back door was open a crack, although the rough, dirty curtains still hung in front of the glass. Harry recognized the voices; he lifted the edge of the curtain to peer through the dirty glass and saw exactly what he expected to: Ginny was behind Hagrid's hut with Draco Malfoy. *A ram and a dragon.* He hadn't had to guess what Sandy had

meant this time.

Their arms were around each other and Ginny was smiling at him. "That was the non-verbal thank you," she said. Harry grimaced; that must have been a kiss. He wasn't sorry to have missed that. In retrospect, he'd probably rather see his mum kiss Snape. "Now the verbal thank you: it is beautiful and wonderful and thank you."

Malfoy looked more consumed by her every time Harry saw them together. His grey eyes seemed to be constantly moving over her, devouring her with his mind, as though he were memorizing every freckle, every small line, every eyelash and even the half-moons on her fingernails. He leaned down again and pressed his lips to hers, finding her ready and responsive, drinking him in, sliding her fingers into his wispy hair. Harry looked away, then back. What was Malfoy doing with his hands? Harry felt a rage wash over him as Malfoy raised his left hand and placed it purposefully over her right breast, just placed it there, not moving. Not missing a beat, Ginny simply moved her hand from his head to his left hand, and removed it from her breast, placing it back around her waist, never breaking the kiss while doing this. But Malfoy would not be deterred; instead of her chest, he now moved the same hand down below her waist, cupping her bottom in his palm, continuing to kiss her. Again, she reached for his wrist and this time pulled the hand up to have it in a more neutral location.

He broke the kiss and pressed his mouth to her neck as she tipped her head back so he could get more of it. Harry felt his pulse racing. Malfoy was moving further down, and now had begun to unbutton her robes, which fell to the ground. His fingers plucked at the buttons on her blouse. She suddenly came to her senses and pushed him away, turning toward the hut to button her blouse again; Harry had a glimpse of a simple white bra with a small fabric rosebud nestled in the valley between the cups. But it was only a glimpse; he ducked down below the windowsill instinctively when she turned.

He heard her talking to Malfoy, so he inched back up to the window, lifting the curtain again. "Draco; we've talked about the hands..."

Malfoy took her in his arms again, not saying anything in response to her complaint. He moved his mouth down her throat again and she made a gurgling noise, grabbing at his shoulders as though she would have collapsed otherwise. He succeeded in undoing one of her blouse buttons again, moving his mouth lower, and now one of her hands was sliding down his chest, coming to rest on his waist.

Harry reached for his wand, feeling his knuckles strain on it as he gripped the wood fiercely. If Malfoy did anything that she didn't want and she couldn't hold him off, Harry wanted to be ready. He knew he shouldn't be watching this, but at the same time he felt that he must, he couldn't risk her being in danger.

Malfoy had undone the buttons on his own robes and they slipped to the ground. He moved his mouth up to her throat again, then his mouth was on hers once more, and as the kiss continued the hand she had at his waist of his pants slid down his side, and she was running her fingers along the side of his thigh, down to the knee, then back up, past his hip to his waist, then back down again.

Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. He could see how twitchy her hand was making Malfoy. He had his mouth on her throat again, concentrating on one spot, while she kept stroking his leg and driving him--and Harry--mad.

This had been continuing for several minutes when Malfoy pulled his mouth away from her throat; there was a bruised patch of skin where his mouth had been, and it was unfortunately

shaped exactly like a mouth. He was unbuttoning her blouse yet again, putting his hands inside it, moving his mouth down...

Harry looked down at his hands. He tried to think of other things. He thought of the Daily Prophet article that had come out after the explosion at the Three Broomsticks. There had been an old photo of him from the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament; he was small and pale and scared-looking. It looked laughable; the article said that Harry Potter had apprehended a Death Eater, along with retired Auror Mad-Eye Moody. A weak-looking little boy and an old man. How much of a threat could these Death Eaters have been, really, to be taken by them? That was the upshot of the article. No mention was made of Voldemort's return; it was as though these Death Eaters were simply having a lark, and got caught. There was no image of the smoking rubble, although there was a quote from Madam Rosmerta with her assertion that it had been Sirius Black who had masterminded it; those caught were merely his stooges. Great, Harry thought. Sirius is accused of yet another thing he didn't do.

They had talked briefly when he had returned to Hogwarts after the ceilidh; they'd come here, to Hagrid's hut, where Sirius could change into his human form again. Because the Polyjuice Potion had worn off, he would have to lie low for a little while, especially avoiding Hogsmeade. And he would have to hope that Ian Lucas wouldn't be questioned either. People in the wizarding world knew he was Sirius' cousin. He might be in trouble for aiding and abetting a fugitive. This was such a mess, Harry thought. The only good thing was that two Death Eaters would not be coming to Voldemort's side when he summoned them. That was something. He dared not look out the window; he could hear moaning from each of them, tiny gasps occasionally. What should he do? he wondered. She seemed to be letting him, now. He felt ill. He should go. She was going to do it; she was going to give herself to his enemy. He took the basilisk amulet out of his shirt and held it in his fist. He had a sudden urge to tear it from around his neck and throw it into the fireplace. But somehow, the moment he touched it, he felt calmer. I need to trust her, he thought.

He raised his eyes to the dirty window, lifting up the corner of the curtain again. She seemed to be trying to shove him away now; his head was between her breasts, but as she succeeded in pushing him on the second try, Harry could see that her bra was still on, another bruise forming on her chest in the V between the cups. She buttoned her blouse for the second time.

"I--we--have to stop. This is just-too much--"

"Listen, I'm sorry Ginny, it's just that--well, it *is* your fifteenth birthday."

She stared at him openmouthed, putting her Hogwarts robes on again. "And you thought my little birthday present to you was going to be sleeping with you?" It looked to Harry like that was exactly what Malfoy thought. He opened and closed his mouth like a rather stupid-looking fish, Harry thought. Ginny bent down, then thrust Malfoy's robes at him.

"Just because I'm fifteen doesn't mean I'm ready for this, Draco."

"You say that," he said, getting that argumentative tone Harry knew so well. "But what your body was saying was very different."

"So what? So you know how to do things that--that make me respond certain ways. I'm still governed by my brain. And my brain is just not ready for this yet. I know boys' brains are between their legs--"

"Hey!"

"Oh, come on. I have six brothers. And I'm not deaf. The things I hear at home! You know how sometimes Muggles who see magic don't even need memory charms because they just

convince themselves they imagined it? Well, my brothers seem to think I'm like that when they're talking about what it's like to be a boy, about sex, about all that. I hear everything. I remember and file it all away. You should have heard one of them going on and on when he was waiting for his balls to drop...I won't tell you which one..."

"Ginny!" Draco Malfoy actually sounded horrified on behalf of all of the Weasley boys.

Truthfully, Harry was too. He wondered if it was Ron...

"Oh Draco! You really don't understand, do you? I'm not a prude; I'm just not mentally ready to have sex."

Malfoy grimaced at her. Harry did, too; there was just something so uncomfortable about hearing a girl talking about the things boys were concerned with, the things they hoped girls didn't know. He thought, Malfoy will have to be a right wanker, waiting for her...

"Well," Malfoy said, his voice shaking. "When do you think you'll be ready?"

She stared at him. "How should I know? I just turned fifteen. I know that it used to be that when a witch turned fifteen it was considered a very big deal, her parents would throw a big party for her and invite wizards who might be interested in marrying her, and sometimes the girls would get married while they were still in school, and they'd go to be with their husbands during holidays instead of their parents. But that was a long time ago; nobody does that anymore. Just because I'm fifteen doesn't mean I'm on some kind of schedule, like a bloody train! Maybe this was a bad idea; maybe I'm too young to be in a relationship like this. I'm just frustrating you..."

Both Malfoy and Harry felt panic then. If she and Malfoy weren't together, what would happen to the plan for putting Lucius Malfoy into Azkaban? Malfoy, however, looked panicked for a different reason.

"No, Ginny! It's my fault. I shouldn't be putting so much pressure on you." Harry was shocked to hear him taking blame. Then he was shocked to hear his own name. "I have to ask, though; is this something to do with Potter?"

She rolled her eyes and threw her hands into the air. "No! This has nothing to do with Harry! This is about me! I am just not ready!"

Malfoy drew his lips into a line, mumbling an apology. He kissed her on the lips, briefly, softly, like that first tentative kiss in the Potions Dungeon. Then, without another word, he turned and stepped into the forest, and Harry could see him skimming the edge of it, until he was out of sight. Then Harry realized that she would probably be coming back into the hut. He ran across the room and had his hand on the door when she came in from the back, stopping in shock when she saw him.

"Uh, hi! There you are, Ginny. I just came in to look for you."

She looked skeptical. But she didn't contradict him. "I just felt like sitting out back, alone. I like to look at the forest." She was standing only about a foot away from him now, and he couldn't fight the urge to suddenly move his lips to her cheek, making only a brief contact with it.

"Happy birthday, Ginny," he said softly. She looked at him with wide eyes.

"We should go back out," she said shakily. He nodded and opened the door. When they returned to the large table, only Ron, Parvati, Neville and Hermione were sitting there with Hagrid. Everyone else had gone; it was almost time for the evening meal, but the sun wasn't ready to go down yet. The days had started lengthening again; they were hurtling toward midsummer and the end of the school year. Suddenly, it seemed that his fifth year had gone very fast. Harry felt he had crammed a huge amount of material into his brain, and wondered whether he would remember any of it when he took the O.W.L.s. Perhaps McGonagall would give him

full marks for Transfiguration just because he'd learned to be an Animagus. He wished he could transform now and run into the forest; Hermione was looking back and forth between him and Ginny with a furious expression; she had noticed the bruise on Ginny's neck. He sat next to her and whispered, "She met *him* behind the hut." Hermione nodded when she heard this, but she still looked at Harry oddly. He fingered the basilisk amulet again. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a fair-haired figure emerge from the forest on the far bank of the lake; then the figure skirted the lake, went behind the greenhouses, and up to the castle. What if something had happened and I hadn't been there? he wondered. Then he looked at Ginny; he remembered that she was ranked third in the Dueling Club and that Malfoy hadn't beaten her dueling (although he wasn't convinced that Malfoy was trying, actually). She can take care of herself, he tried to tell himself. She would never let him do anything she didn't want to do. The question that bothered him was--
What did Ginny want to do?

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Six

Addiction and Withdrawal

Life seemed to return to normal. Harry rose everyday, went running with Hermione, went to class, did his homework, and withstood Snape continuing to humiliate him in public while actually giving him quite good grades. He went to Dueling Club and prefects' meetings and checked in with McGonagall once a week. He also held Quidditch practices, but Ron was actually the one who was coming up with the strategies and plans for beating Ravenclaw in the final match of the year, in June. Harry was glad that Cho Chang was all right and would soon be playing Seeker again. The next match was at the end of April, when Ravenclaw would play Slytherin. He hoped she mopped up the floor with Malfoy (although he had no intention of letting her beat Gryffindor).

Flitwick was enjoying his return to the classroom. Harry had asked Dumbledore whether there was any indication yet of who had put the alarm spell on the classroom doorway; he said there was not. He wanted to ask him what he had asked Snape, whether his ability to conquer pain spells came from Voldemort, but he stopped himself every time. He just got a bad feeling that it was going to be yet another question that Dumbledore didn't feel like answering yet.

Lupin hadn't left Sirius' side since the day of the ceilidh. Sirius went with him to work every night, not just when Lupin was a werewolf. Lupin was worried about Sirius being alone if someone from the Ministry of Magic tracked him down; he wasn't worried for himself, he was already persona non grata in the wizarding world. He was strictly an unofficial operative, working for Dumbledore because he had asked him. Most of the time he was just a werewolf who had to work as a night watchman at a warehouse to pay his rent and buy food.

The world also seemed to have forgotten the Westminster tube station. Harry felt that there was too much that people were willing to let go. They didn't think about the people who had no choice, the people who lost loved ones in the tube station, or Madam Rosmerta having to rebuild the Three Broomsticks (although he didn't like her very much, he expected that the village would miss the pub a great deal). Of course, Dumbledore had said after that day that all Hogsmeade visits were canceled until further notice. Harry supposed that was to be expected, and he had warned them that might happen, in September.

Harry wondered if this was what it was like for his parents when they were at school and Voldemort was still in power. Constant wondering, waiting for the next disaster, not knowing whether it would touch you personally or be something you could afford to tuck into the back of your brain because that wasn't your sister who lost her eye, your father who was killed or tortured.

In the first class they had with Moody after the ceilidh, he was uncharacteristically quiet and reserved. He looked at them all when they had trickled into the room and taken their seats. "Today," he began, "we will not be doing any hexes, curses, defense strategies or counter charms. What I want to do today is to find out whether you are a different person now, having seen some evil close up?"

He walked slowly around the room, his wooden leg clunking loudly on the floor. His good eye looked at each of them in turn, his magical eye for once seeming to be in sync with it. Ron looked uncomfortable; the gash on his cheek had healed pretty well, but there was a very fine line visible because of his freckles; there was a kind of border now, on his cheek, a line where the halves of some of his freckles didn't match up. He had decided to grow his facial hair to hide this, and now had the beginnings of a bright red beard and mustache, which Harry had heard Parvati complaining about. She obviously didn't share Hermione's opinion of red beards. "Well?" Moody barked, making them jump. "Who was at the Three Broomsticks when it blew? I was there, but I was busy watching the damn Death Eaters and trying to keep people from getting killed." Only Ron and Parvati raised their hands. Moody came over to them; they were sitting together, near the windows. He looked Parvati over; she seemed very uncomfortable about this. "You look none the worse for wear," he said in a dismissing tone to her. Then he took Ron's chin in his wrinkled hand and turned his head so he could see his right cheek. "Almost undetectable scar. Good. But how did it make you feel, when the roof fell in, when you were lying under the rubble? How will this affect your attitude toward the Dark Arts and people who practice it?"

Ron looked at Parvati, then at Moody. Harry watched him. Ron hadn't ever really gone through something like this before. He sacrificed himself to get Harry and Hermione across McGonagall's enchanted chessboard when they were in first year, but it was Harry who faced Quirrell and a weakened Voldemort. And Ron was on the other side of the rockfall in the Chamber of Secrets while Harry fought the basilisk to save Ginny. He'd been pulled into the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack by Sirius in his dog form, and he broke his leg and came face to face with Wormtail, but it was a sick, frightened Wormtail, and Ron had still been getting his mind around this little man being the pet rat he'd let sleep in his bed. He'd never been caught in a terrorist attack until now, he'd never really faced Voldemort, or even a memory of the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle, as Ginny had.

Ron looked down. "I don't know. I know that I think some things about Death Eaters even more strongly than I did before..." he said softly.

"Like what?" Moody spoke in a medium tone, as though they were having a private conversation. Ron shrugged.

"Well, I always thought they were real cowards, hiding behind You-Know-Who's power, and masks and hooded cloaks. Sneaking around and making a building fall on a bunch of innocent people seems like just another cowardly thing to do."

"Are you more vigilant now that this has happened to you?"

Harry remembered Crouch saying 'CONSTANT VIGILANCE!' when he had been

pretending to be Moody. Ron looked irritated.

“How could vigilance have saved me on Saturday? There was nothing to see inside the pub; you only saw them because of your eye.” Ron had never spoken to Moody this way before, but Moody didn’t seem to be upset about it.

“Exactly. How could vigilance have saved anyone? Anyone without a magic eye, that is.” He smiled briefly. “That’s what terrorism is. It catches people by surprise, and even if you are not caught in the attack, the psychological effects can be just as damaging. If you are a member of the group that was attacked, you are now terrorized because you need to worry constantly about someone attacking you. That’s the real purpose of terrorist attacks around the world. Moslems attack Jews, Jews attack Moslems, Protestants attack Catholics, Catholics attack Protestants, bigots of all kinds attack people with dark skin or some other characteristic they don’t like. And the next thing you know, any person who shares that characteristic is having nightmares, worrying about whether they’ll be next, or someone they love. That’s the real effect of terrorism. The name says it all; it attacks us with our own terrors. Boggarts love to swarm in an area where there’s been a terrorist attack. They hide in out-of-the-way corners and wait to be uncovered by people clearing rubble or looking for bodies. And people in those situations are going to be hard pressed to be able to laugh, to say, ‘Ridikkulous!’ That’s the real cost.” Parvati looked down at her hands on her desk and swallowed. She whispered, “I keep having nightmares. I’m under the beam again, and I’m calling and calling, and no one hears me...” Ron put his hand over hers; she looked at him and tears started running down her cheeks. “And I didn’t know where you were,” she was saying to Ron now with a catch in her throat, “or whether you were all right...”

Ron pulled his chair closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders and she put her head on his shoulder, crying freely, while he held her and rubbed her back. Harry could not watch. He looked at Hermione, who had a stricken look on her face, worse than when she had seen that Ron was all right. She turned to Harry then, and the need in her eyes was overwhelming; he swallowed and tried to look away, but he couldn’t. When Moody spoke again, he jumped. “Now, this time, no one died, or even had particularly dire injuries. But now that Voldemort’s back, it’s just a matter of time until he touches all of your lives in some more tangible way. You’ve got to face it when it comes. Whether that means getting injured yourself or dying, or surviving, you’ve got to face it. Of those three, which do you think would be worse?” Seamus, who had been at Honeyduke’s when the Three Broomsticks blew, shrugged casually and said, “Dying.”

Harry had a feeling this was not the answer Moody was looking for and braced himself for the old man to bellow, “WRONG, FINNIGAN!” But oddly, it didn’t happen. Moody was very subdued today. He stared at Seamus for a full minute while Seamus squirmed in his seat, awaiting what he must also think was an inevitable shout of contempt. But the contempt was very quiet this time.

“Dying,” Moody muttered, shaking his head. “No imagination... You probably also think dying is worse than getting a kiss from a Dementor, don’t you?” Seamus squirmed some more. “I’d say,” Moody went on, “that being injured--depending on the nature of the injury--and surviving without a scratch are neck and neck, and dying is dead last. So to speak.”

Lavender looked annoyed, doodling with her quill and grimacing. She glanced over at Ron and Parvati, who seemed to be in their own little world; Parvati was still crying on Ron, and he was patting her back and murmuring to her, his eyes wet with unshed tears.

“AND WHERE WERE YOU?” Moody bellowed at her suddenly, making everyone jump again. Lavender jerked her head up at him, turning from her usual pale beige to pale ivory.

“I—I didn’t go to the village on Saturday,” she whispered. Moody nodded.

“And now you probably think you missed all the fun. Typical. But when I say ‘surviving,’ I mean BEING there and not getting injured. If you’re injured, okay, you’ve got issues. You’ve got to get yourself mended up, or--” he pointed to his eye and leg, “get replacement parts.” He clunked back to his desk. “But if you’re there, and the bloke on one side of you dies, and the bloke on the other side of you is in hospital, missing half his brain, and you’re physically fine, what you’re going to be dealing with is survivor guilt. Why did he die when I didn’t? Why is she going through the rest of her life with one arm, when I’ve got two? And of course, the big question: *Why am I alive?*”

He leaned against the desk. “We’re facing dark times. You’ll come face to face with evil and you’ll have to choose a side. You’ll have to get past survivor guilt and fear of dying and being maimed just to get up and go through your daily routine. It won’t be easy. But you’ve got each other,” he said, walking over to Ron and putting his hand on his shoulder. “That’s the most important weapon you have. I’ve had you attacking each other with curses and hexes, sure, but when all is said and done, you’re all still friends, aren’t you? Members of the same house, united.”

He came and stood in front of Harry. “That little Flitwick boy is one to watch, isn’t he Potter?” Harry looked up at him and nodded, his throat tight. “More balls than all of the Death Eaters put together, in my humble opinion.” Earlier in the school year, many of them would have been shocked by his language, but they were used to him now. He definitely was unlike any teacher they’d ever had—even Crouch, when he’d been pretending to be Moody.

“He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind and stand up for someone he knew had been falsely accused. We need more people to show that kind of strength of character right now. We need to be united and strong. We’ll have losses and scares, sure. And you’ll be there for each other, helping each other through the bad times. But don’t let it paralyze you or they’ll win. Most of all, keep fighting the darkness within you, the urge to say, ‘Oh, what the hell. What does it matter?’”

Then his voice became softer, but more adamant. “It matters.”

He turned walked to the front of the room again, moving his magical eye over each of them in turn. His voice had become softer. The room was utterly still.

“It’s all that matters.”

* * * * *

Easter break came. Five of the first years were staying: Andy & Amy Donegal, Will Flitwick, Jules Quinn, and Gillian Lockley. Ginny’s roommates were all staying, but Ginny and Ron were going home. Fred and George were staying, finally getting somewhat serious about their N.E.W.T.s; Angelina and Alicia were staying for the same reason; Seamus and Neville planned to stay, as well as Colin and Katie. Harry and Hermione were of course staying, but Parvati and Lavender were not. Harry heard Ron and Parvati talking about going out in Ottery St. Catchpole during the holiday. He hoped there were more things to do there than in Hogsmeade. Harry knew that Draco Malfoy was also going home, and he wondered whether he and Ginny might also be meeting up in the village near the Weasleys.

Halfway through the holiday week, Harry was up late reading by the fire in the common room; Hermione was working on a Potions essay at a far table while Neville and Seamus played

Exploding Snap and George and Fred speculated on how bad the N.E.W.T.s would be. There was a comforting low murmur of conversation in the room, punctuated occasionally by explosions coming from the direction of Seamus and Neville. For once Neville wasn't down in the dungeons working on potions; he told Harry he was giving himself the week off, he wanted to actually relax during the holiday. Neville wasn't Seamus' first choice of a person to play with, but Dean was gone for the week, so he had sighed and asked him. Neville had never played before (no one had ever asked him before) so he jumped at the chance. Harry thought he looked odd, and jittery. There was something not quite right about his skin tone and eye color... Harry had dozed off over his book, his Christmas gift from Ron. When he jerked his head up, there was no one left in the room. He checked his watch; it was almost two in the morning. Why hadn't Hermione at least woken him up and told him to go to bed? he wondered. He yawned hugely and stretched, picking up the book, which had fallen on the floor and cracked its spine. He frowned at it; that's not good, he thought.

He heard a footstep on the girls' stairs and looked up; Hermione was coming into the common room. "Harry? Haven't you gone to bed yet?"

"Fell asleep reading." He showed her the book; she came over and examined it, also frowning. "Broken spine," she murmured. "That's not good." Harry smiled. Sometimes he thought she *was* psychic. He looked at her now, in her night shirt and dressing gown, hoping that she wasn't, or she'd know that he was thinking about--

Suddenly she smiled at him and crawled into his lap. Well, there goes the idea that she's *not* psychic, thought Harry, as she pulled his head down to hers in a deep kiss. He grunted happily; they'd had a little more opportunity to go off on their own for some kissing since the holiday had started, but while the rest of the school was awake, there was always the risk of being caught together in an incriminating situation.

He wrapped his arms around her now, hugging her to him as closely as he could, feeling her hand stroking his leg, remembering Ginny doing that to Malfoy. He moved his mouth down and she helped him, undoing a few buttons on her night shirt. Harry sighed at the result; her mouth was in his hair, her breathing changing as he moved his mouth farther down.

"Harry?" she said softly. He didn't answer with words; he gave her a kind of "huh?" noise while he was otherwise using his mouth. That seemed good enough for her though, as she continued. "You know what I really miss? Lying in the same bed with you to sleep."

He brought his face up now, looking at her, wondering what exactly she was suggesting. He swallowed, remembered New Year's eve, before Sirius interrupted them. Could he actually manage to do that again? Without going insane?

His heart was thudding painfully in his chest. "That--that would be nice. Except that we're not the only ones here now. Neville and Seamus are upstairs asleep."

She smiled coyly at him and stroked his cheek. "But I've got my dorm all to myself..."

Harry hadn't thought of that. Heart louder now, more painful. Buzzing in his ears. He swallowed. "But--what if someone sees me coming out of there in the morning?"

She shrugged. "Go up to your dorm and get your Invisibility Cloak." Of course! he thought; his brain felt like it was on overload. How was she so calm? Unless--she really did mean she just wanted to sleep beside him. That was probably it. That's all she had said. That was all she wanted, some cozy cuddling. Harry felt he should demur, insist it was wiser for him to sleep in his own bed. He did not want to spend the night being frustrated (although there was no guarantee he would not spend the night in his own bed being frustrated).

But he couldn't bring himself to reject her plan. He nodded, his throat tight. "I'll meet you up there in a few minutes." She smiled and kissed his cheek, then stood up, buttoning her night shirt. She went up the stairs to the girls' dorms without looking back. Harry thought about just plain running; going out the portrait hole, down the stairs, out of the castle, changing into a golden griffin and jumping into the sky, soaring over the lake, and forest...

But instead he walked on unsteady legs up to his dorm and undressed for bed, leaving on only his drawers, tying his dressing gown loosely and padding back downstairs barefoot, carrying the cloak. Before he went up the stairs to the girls' dorms, however, he had a thought. He drew Sandy out of his sleeve and held her up to speak to her.

"Sandy?"

"Yes, Harry Potter?"

"I'm not going to wear you to sleep tonight. You'll be warm; I'll leave you here by the fire."

"Why?"

"Well--I'd rather not get into that. You don't mind, do you?"

"I am merely curious about why."

"Sorry, Sandy."

He put her down on the hearthrug. If he didn't do this--but he put the thought out of his mind. Somehow, leaving Sandy here made it all seem so premeditated, like murder. He swallowed again and stood, putting the cloak on and going to the girls' stairs.

When he reached the door for the fifth-year girls, Harry realized he'd never been here before. He opened the door cautiously. Hermione had put the candles out, but there was an almost-full moon brightly illuminating the room. He took off the cloak, then the dressing gown. He sat on the edge of the turned-down bed; the others were neatly made up, deserted-looking. He had never felt more nervous in his life. Where was Hermione?

The door opened and she entered; he supposed she'd been to the lavatory. She turned and took out her wand, said something Harry couldn't hear, waving the wand at the door. Locking charm, thought Harry. She put her wand away and turned around, still standing by the door as if she were also a bit nervous. Then she had a determined look on her face, and Harry smiled; that was the Hermione he knew. She smiled back, still visibly nervous. Maybe they shouldn't be putting this kind of pressure on themselves, maybe they should just lie down and go to sleep, maybe...

Hermione untied her dressing gown and let it fall open; it was the only thing she was wearing, and Harry gasped in surprise; he couldn't believe how beautiful she was. The idea of sleeping fled from his brain. He had tried to imagine her many, many times since Dudley had first handed him the photograph she had sent him. He had mentally removed the bikini in his mind, wondering...but this was so different. This was real. She was real. She was standing before him expectantly, almost looking like she would cry if he didn't do something, and the thought made him step across the distance between them swiftly and take her in his arms, pull her mouth up to his, push the dressing gown off her shoulders, clasp her to him tightly.

Her hands shook as she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his drawers, pushing them down. He pulled his mouth away from hers and pressed it to her neck as he felt the cool air touch him and the fabric land on his feet. He kicked them away, loosening his hold on her, but only to move his hands over her, to explore every inch of her as he moved his mouth further down her body and she threw her head back, making, he thought, the most wonderful sounds, her hands wandering over his body.

They stood like that for what seemed a long time, hands and mouths roaming all over, pulses racing, sweat beading on hot skin only to be licked off ravenously. Then, Hermione looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Harry,” she whispered. It seemed a time to whisper. “I want you to take something else off.” He gave her a lopsided smile. “Sorry; I should have thought of that,” he said, removing his glasses, moving to put them on the table.

He was on his way back to her when she said, “No. That’s not it. Harry--take off the basilisk.” He stopped and looked down at the amulet on his chest, then back at her. Her curls were wild, her body was limned by the moonlight, looking amazing, and he swallowed, knowing that even as she stood before him like this, and he stood completely defenseless before her, she was somehow still unconvinced that he wanted her, only her.

Harry lifted the chain over his head and placed it deliberately on the table, next to his glasses, then went to the bed, holding out his hand to her. She walked purposefully to him, throwing her arms around him again.

This seemed so right now. Harry was glad that they’d managed to wait this long. But even as they touched and kissed and their heartbeats increased, Harry wondered, *how* had they waited? How had they not done this before, how had he not moved his mouth up her legs, her hip, her ribcage, her breasts, her neck? How had they not ripped each other’s clothes off and attacked each other in the corridors of the castle, in the classrooms, in the Great Hall? How had they shown so much restraint?

Time seemed to randomly slow down and speed up. Harry felt he could never grow tired of moving his hands and mouth over her, playing her like an instrument, feeling her hands and mouth on him, a never-ending surprise...After a while, Hermione threw back her head and arched her back; he looked up at her, moved up and took her mouth again; her breath like an inferno, her moans an aria of desire. She gazed up at him, shaken, trying to get her breath. “Oh, Harry,” she whispered. “That was--I mean--my head--”

He smiled, wanting her more than ever. “We’re not done yet,” he said softly, kissing her chin. She nodded slowly.

“I know. I just meant--top of my head--blown off--” she gasped.

“In a good way, I hope.”

She grinned. “Understatement,” was all she said before pulling his mouth down to hers again.

Then she broke the kiss, looking up at him. “You know, you sound like you’ve done this before,” she said slyly. “Would you like to tell me something?”

Now it was his turn to be sly. “Nothing to tell. Except that I have--”

“What?”

“Done this with you before. In my mind. Only about a million times...”

“Oh, is that all? I thought teenage boys thought about it constantly...”

“And teenage girls don’t?”

Her eyes were unfocussed with passion as she reached down and gently wrapped her hand around him, making him gasp. “Only about a million times...”

He pressed his mouth to hers again, then moved it down her throat. She began the process of wrapping herself thoroughly around him, her arms and legs, locking her ankles together in the small of his back as she finally pulled him into her, making him widen his eyes. He had never felt so vulnerable--and so safe, so protected, so enveloped.

Harry flashed back to the Yule Ball, the pretty girl with Viktor Krum, and then really seeing her,

seeing that it was Hermione. He realized that he'd never thought of her as pretty until then. And her kissing him on the train platform before they separated for the summer...She definitely wasn't under any curse then. She hadn't kissed Ron. Other images unbidden came into his mind; Hermione running in the park in Surrey; Hermione working in the garden on Privet Drive with him, smudges of dirt on her cheeks, sweat running down her neck and then further down still...

Harry had wanted her last summer, he'd wanted her all year, and now they were finally together, really together, and it felt like it was always meant to be, even though he hadn't seen her, not actually seen her, for four years.

Time lost all meaning. Finally, he started to cry out, then lowered his mouth to hers, and she groaned against his tongue, shuddering throughout her body, and a moment later, he collapsed, kissing her shoulder, her neck, her earlobe, her jaw...It was like the polar opposite of the Cruciatus Curse. He had known pain coursing through his body; now he knew what it was like to feel the exact opposite in every fiber of his being.

Hermione's mouth was pressed against his shoulder, a warm suction. He raised himself to look down at her, then moved to lie at her side, still staring at her, stroking the side of her face. She beamed back at him. Harry was happier than he ever remembered being, feeling like he would never stop smiling.

"How's the top of your head?" he asked impishly.

"Flying somewhere over the Forbidden Forest," she answered softly, then laughed out loud; a real laugh, not a giggle or twitter. She had a woman's laugh, he realized, not a girl's. It was wonderful and throaty and made him want her all over again.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. He was surprised when she scowled.

"Harry, you don't have to say that just because--"

"Hermione, stop it. You are. That's that. If you argue with me, we might not do that again," he teased. An obvious lie.

She smiled now. "Threatening me with frustration already? Giving me a taste of Harry Potter and then taking it away?" Now it was her turn to look mischievous. "I thought it was women who were supposed to use sex as a weapon."

He laughed, gazing back at her. "No threats. No games. Just two very happy people, feeling very, very lucky."

"I second that," she agreed, pillowing her head on his chest and throwing her leg across him, her arm on his stomach. He looked down at her as she closed her eyes, a peaceful expression on her face, and he closed his own eyes, acutely aware of every point of contact between his skin and hers, thinking how wonderful it was, how amazing and perfect.

* * * * *

Harry woke up near dawn. The pale light in the room made it possible for him to see where his drawers and dressing gown were. He extricated himself from her carefully and dressed, putting on the basilisk last. He picked up the Invisibility Cloak and went to sit on the edge of the bed, watching her sleep. He'd watched her sleep before, but this was different. This was a much bigger deal than kissing in the Charms classroom or being on the hearthrug late at night, or even just sleeping side by side in his bed during the Christmas holiday. This was huge.

He stroked her arm, then shook her gently, whispering her name. She finally stirred, looking where he'd been lying beside her first, then, as she became more oriented, she realized that he was sitting on her other side. She pulled herself to a sitting position, trying to keep her eyes

open. The sheet fell to her waist, and Harry drew in his breath.

“Hermione, I was going to tell you I have to go, but you don’t exactly make it easy, sitting there with--so little on--”

She smiled, then leaned over to kiss him. “I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘naked.’ Actually, I was going to put on a nightshirt and get some more sleep.” She stood up, walking to her wardrobe unselfconsciously, while Harry swallowed and fought the urge to tear his own clothes off again.

When she was covered up by a long T-shirt, she sat next to him on the bed and laced her fingers through his.

“I’d say let’s meet for running at seven, but we’ve already had our workout, don’t you think?”

Harry grinned. “But don’t go down to breakfast without me, okay? I want to spend as much time with you as I can while it’s still the holiday.”

He kissed her lightly, still smiling. “Of course. I wouldn’t dream of eating a single meal without you.” He paused then, wondering how to put this. “Hermione, I need to ask you a couple of things. Did you--did you go to see Madam Pomfrey for--”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Two months ago.”

“Two months ago!”

She smiled shyly. “I didn’t have the nerve to do anything about it until last night. And even then--I was really nervous. I kept waiting for you to run screaming into the night...”

He stroked her hair with his hand. “Oh, Hermione...as if that would ever happen.”

She looked up at him her eyes glistening. “What was the other thing you wanted to ask?”

Harry wasn’t sure he should ask this now. It seemed to show such a lack of faith. But--he had to know. “Hermione--you don’t feel like you’re--under a spell, do you?”

She thrust her fingers into his hair and pulled him to her in a long, languid kiss. When she ended the kiss she looked into his eyes. “Only under the spell of Harry Potter,” she said firmly.

He swallowed and looked at her. “Did I mention that you don’t make it easy to go?”

She grinned. “Good. Except that you really should, before Neville and Seamus wake up.”

“I know.” He rose and donned the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione picked up her wand and went to the door, undoing the locking charm she’d put on it. She cautiously opened it and glanced around the landing.

“Deserted. Go ahead.”

Before he left, he reached out with his hand for just a moment, then quickly slipped out the door. Hermione squeaked a little when she felt the contact, then laughed.

“Being groped by the Invisible Man,” she said musingly. “Kinky.”

He smiled under the cloak, having to make an effort to suppress his laughter. He felt positively giddy. He padded lightly down the girls’ staircase, wanting to skip, and then he went up the boys’ staircase cautiously, hoping Neville and Seamus would still be fast asleep, hoping they hadn’t checked his bed, then the common room. He hoped a lot of things.

But the two other boys were still snoring softly behind their bedcurtains when he entered the room. He removed the cloak and placed it carefully in his trunk, then removed his dressing gown and climbed into bed. Without her in it, it seemed absurdly large and lonely. Harry pulled the covers up to his chin, remembering her, remembering the night. But that only lasted for a few seconds before he was fast asleep, a large smile plastered across his face.

* * * * *

Harry woke up again at eight o’clock. He opened his bedcurtains and saw that Seamus was

dressed and ready to go out the door.

“Oh! Morning, Harry. Thought you’d sleep in. You were downstairs pretty late, weren’t you?” Harry nodded. “Fell asleep reading. But I’ve slept enough now.” He rose and went to the wardrobe. Seamus left. While he dressed, Harry listened to Neville breathing peacefully in his sleep. Was Ginny possibly considering breaking up with Malfoy? he wondered. Did she think Neville would be less pushy about a physical relationship? Harry could see that she might. He had a hard time picturing Neville groping a girl. Just hold out a little longer, Ginny, he thought. Until Malfoy’s dad is in Azkaban...

But now his thoughts turned from Ginny to Hermione, who was only about seven months older than Ginny. Not only had she been ready, she pretty much orchestrated the whole thing. And she thought he’d run screaming into the night! But then, he remembered hiding from her during the Christmas holiday. He’d had his share of jitters as well.

He left Neville still snoring away behind his bedcurtains and went down to the common room. He collected Sandy from the hearth. When he picked her up, he said happily, “Good morning, Sandy!”

“Good morning, Harry Potter. Why did you not wear me last night?”

“Well, Sandy--I spent the night with Hermione, and I kind of wanted it to be just the two of us...”

“You have spent the night with her before, with me on your arm. Why did you not want me with you last night?”

“This was different.”

“How was it different?”

He frowned. “It just was. I’m not sure how to explain it to you, or if snakes even have any way to understand...”

He looked up and saw Hermione at the foot of the girls’ stairs, her prefect badge on her robes like him, a glow about her that made him think, *Surely someone will notice...*

“My ears were burning,” she told him.

“What? You couldn’t understand...”

“No. It’s all just hissing to me. But I had a feeling I knew what you were talking about anyway.”

“I wasn’t--I mean--”

She smiled at him, and laughed. “Don’t get so jumpy on me now, Harry! I was just joking around.” He smiled back at her, putting Sandy around his arm again. *No one’s going to mistake that glow*, he thought. *Everyone will see...*

But no one did. They sat on opposite sides of the Gryffindor table to eat breakfast. Harry tried not to meet her eyes too often. He grunted thanks when she offered him some of her *Daily Prophet* to read. He didn’t really want to read it, but then he saw that there was a section he’d never noticed before, the financial section, called *Your Daily Profit*. He skimmed the stories about the up-and-coming wizard businesses, and those that were slipping into bankruptcy (one of the textbook publishing houses was up to its neck in red ink). I’ll have to get Sirius to invest some of my money, he thought. Better than it just sitting in a vault.

He wanted to fly on his Firebolt for some reason, but he realized Hermione would probably not be interested in sitting around and watching him fly. But maybe she’d want to fly *with* him. He thought of their brief flight together, when they escaped from the Charms classroom through the window. He’d flown since then, to demonstrate to McGonagall that he could. They’d gone down to the edge of the forest after dinner one night, and after transforming, he’d spread his

wings and leapt into the sky, going higher and higher, finally feeling the tree tops brushing his stomach as he flew over the forest.

He almost changed back and plummeted out of the sky when he saw the clearing deep in the forest where the giants were living. He spent a few minutes circling overhead, just watching them move about their campsite, a fire in the center where several were sitting, cooking, some of them off to the side looking like they were tanning hides; Harry didn't want to know what animals the hides were from. They didn't notice him up in the air above them, and he was glad, although he needn't have worried; he was too high up for them to reach him. He'd flown back to McGonagall and changed back without telling her what he'd seen. He knew that the teachers knew about the giants, but he knew that the students weren't supposed to know.

It had been exhilarating; he felt like it was worth the aching he experienced in his bones afterward, to be able to do that. He remembered the first time he'd ever flown a broom, how he felt so at home in the air. Now he knew why; he was born to do this, to soar on a thermal with his wings at just the right subtle angle to catch the warm wind, spiraling toward the ground in a carefully-controlled descent...

After breakfast, Harry and Hermione walked into the entrance hall, close together but not touching. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, saw her looking back and couldn't suppress a small smile from curling up the corners of his mouth. Hermione looked like she was trying not to grin maniacally. He walked toward the doors and then went outside, sensing her right behind, following him. No one else came outside. Harry slipped into the shrubbery near the doors, ducking behind a tall topiary that had been cut to resemble a hippogriff. That seemed very appropriate, somehow. Hermione was with him in a matter of moments. He pulled her to him, and she slipped her arms around him, one hand behind his neck, the other in the small of his back, but as the kiss deepened, that hand slid down, making Harry moan against her mouth. He pulled away from her, smiling, and she kept her hand right where it was.

"Miss Granger," he said in a teasing voice. "Are you trying to compromise my virtue?"

"Already done," she reminded him, kissing the base of his neck. "Anyway, lately, I've been trying to avoid touching you in--certain places--and I don't exactly have to bother doing that anymore, do I?"

Harry showed that he agreed by leaning down to kiss her again, letting his own hands wander into previously-forbidden territory. After a minute, Hermione came up for air, saying, "Not that this isn't nice, but are we going to spend our holiday snogging and groping in the bushes? There are more comfortable places where we can--um--do more--" she was planting kisses on his neck again while moving her hands once more.

"Actually," he said, trying not to go insane from what she was doing, "I was wondering if you'd like to go flying."

She pulled back at him and looked like she was considering this. "Hmm. That might be a good idea. I really have to get over my acrophobia sometime; someday I'll be able to Apparate, but in the meantime, I really should get more comfortable with a broom."

"Well--I wasn't talking about brooms."

She frowned at him, then widened her eyes when she realized what he meant. "Oh, no you don't, Harry Potter! I am not doing that again!"

"Hermione, it worked out fine..."

"You were a basket-case afterwards! What if you pushed yourself too hard and changed back while you were a hundred feet in the air? You'd be killed! Not to mention your passenger."

Besides, you've got Sandy, haven't you?"

"I've flown *two*-hundred feet in the air now, Hermione, and McGonagall is convinced that I'm fine. Oh, come on. It'll be fun. I can leave Sandy somewhere so she won't be alarmed."

Hermione drew her mouth into a line. "I'm sorry Harry, I just--can we just work on me and brooms right now?"

He sighed and kissed her on the forehead. "Of course. I'm not putting pressure on you."

She leaned against his chest and looked up at him. "No," she said musingly, "you never do. That's why I had to go and seduce you." She laughed then, in that wonderful throaty way he remembered from the night, and he kissed her soundly before leading her out of the shrubbery, her fingers laced in his. They went up to Gryffindor Tower; Harry was going to get his Firebolt and ask Fred or George whether Hermione could borrow one of their brooms, so she wouldn't be stuck with one of the poky ones the school kept for students who didn't have their own.

But when he entered his dorm, he heard a strange sound. It seemed to be coming from Neville's bed. Frowning, he walked to the bed and pulled back the curtains, shocked by what he saw. Neville was shivering and sweating all at once, a strange bilious green color; his eyes were an eerie yellow; Harry suddenly realized that he didn't know what color Neville's eyes were supposed to be, but he was quite certain it wasn't yellow. He was wearing blue cotton pajamas that were soaked through with sweat, and he was staring straight up, his mouth wide open in a silent scream as he continued to shake and sweat.

Harry felt panicked; he did the only thing he could think of; he ran to the door and bellowed down the stairs, "*Hermione!*"

He went back to Neville's bed; he was convulsing now. It seemed to be some kind of seizure. He was afraid to touch him, or make a sound. He felt paralyzed. All he could do was stand and watch this boy he'd known for five years suffer.

He heard her feet on the stairs, could hear the note of panic in her voice as she cried out, "Harry! Are you all right?" Of course, she'd think it was him, he realized. But when she was in the room, she saw where he was standing, and ran to Neville's bedside.

"Neville!" she cried, going to her knees. She immediately put her hand on his head, then felt for the pulse in his neck.

"His heartbeat is irregular; it's galloping, then jumping about, then galloping again," she said after holding her hand there for half a minute. Harry marveled at the way she wasn't afraid to jump right in, to put her hands on him, when he was terrified. Not for himself, but in case something he did caused Neville harm. *We'll take the cup together...* he remembered saying...

"We need to get him to the hospital wing," she said urgently.

Harry thought. "What if we stun him? It might put in into a kind of--" he floundered for the meaning he was looking for.

"A stasis? Good idea. And then we could use that *Mobilicorpus* spell to get him there." So that's what they did, and when they emerged into the common room with Neville's body, everyone present looked up, shocked. Alicia had been sitting at a table with Angelina, preparing for N.E.W.T.s; she came running over when she saw them. The twins were by the fire, also doing N.E.W.T. preparation, also clearly alarmed by Neville's state. As far as they knew, he was the closest thing their sister had to a boyfriend.

"We stunned him so we could move him to the hospital wing," Hermione told them all.

Harry said hoarsely, "When I went in our room, he was making strange noises, and sweating and shaking, and--and he looked like that--" he said, referring to his green cast and his yellow

eyes, which were still open.

“We’ll come with you,” George and Fred said, and Alicia and Angelina were right behind. The six of them escorted Neville’s body to the hospital wing, and Harry’s head was spinning the whole time with gruesome thoughts.

There are six of us, his brain said. The same as the number of pall bearers you need to carry a coffin. *Neville will be all right*, said a different voice in a different part of his brain. *Don’t talk about pall bearers*. Does he look all right to you? his brain said now. Harry felt his head had been split down the middle; it wasn’t his scar, it wasn’t Voldemort. He felt like he didn’t know how to handle this, that Neville of all people should be a victim of--of what? What had happened to him, and who had done it? His throat was tight; he couldn’t swallow.

When they reached the infirmary, George opened the door and Harry and Hermione guided Neville in. Harry ran to find Madam Pomfrey in her office, but she wasn’t there. He thought he heard a noise in the Apothecary, so Harry opened the door, not bothering to knock. Instead of Madam Pomfrey, however, Harry found Snape reaching for a jar labeled *Powdered Spleenwort*, which he presumably was going to add to the bubbling cauldron that hovered over a purple fire.

“Oh!” he said with relief as soon as he saw Snape. “I’m so glad it’s you! Come quick. It’s Neville.”

Snape put the jar down on a work table with a loud thunk and strode through Madam Pomfrey’s office and into the infirmary in the blink of an eye. Hermione had put him in one of the beds and had taken the traveling spell and stunning charm off him. He lay there as he had before, in his own bed, twitching and sweating, pale green skin offset by eerily yellow eyes. Snape leaned over him; he put his ear to his chest and then put his fingers on his neck, as Hermione had. He looked in Neville’s eyes, looked at his skin, then in his mouth; his tongue was swollen terribly. It was amazing he hadn’t choked on it.

“Longbottom!” he shouted in his face, holding his head still with both hands over Neville’s ears. He looked in Neville’s eyes; they moved slightly. “What do you see, Longbottom?” he said in a fierce whisper.

Neville opened his mouth; a hoarse rasp that had the sound of a death rattle in it was all that came out. “*Scorpions. Beetles. All over my body. All over the wall...*” Suddenly, he started gagging, then his whole body was convulsing. Harry clenched his jaw, unable to stand the sight of Neville like this. His voice had sounded horrible--not like Neville at all.

Snape pulled out his wand and whispered, “*Reducio*,” waving it over Neville’s mouth. The gagging stopped, but the seizure continued. Snape looked up at Alicia, who was watching with her fist in her mouth.

“Does Professor McGonagall know?” he said to her suddenly. She shook her head. He pointed at Angelina. “You. Go tell her. You--” he pointed at Alicia. “You’re Head Girl--you remember the password to the headmaster’s study?” She nodded. “Go get him. Now.”

Alicia and Angelina turned and fled. Fred and George still hovered nearby, looking more serious than Harry had ever seen them. “And you two!” he barked at them suddenly. “Make yourselves useful for once and find out where in the bloody hell Pomfrey is!”

“I’ll check the greenhouses,” Fred said, running toward the door.

“I’ll check the library,” George called over his shoulder as he also ran out.

“Just find her!” he bellowed at their backs. Hermione was sitting on the opposite side of the bed from Snape, holding Neville’s hand steadfastly, murmuring meaningless but soothing-sounding

reassurances to the senseless boy. He had stopped convulsing and Snape was checking his pulse again. Harry saw how solicitous Snape was with him, how careful. Perhaps he'd been hard on Neville all this time for the same reason he'd given Sirius for being hard on Harry--to toughen him up. What had happened? Harry wondered. What was wrong with him?

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked softly. As soon as he thought it, he couldn't not say it. Snape didn't look at him; he stayed focused on Neville. "Withdrawal. I'm not sure what he became addicted to, but he's definitely in withdrawal. I have a few guesses, but if we could just find out what he was taking--"

"I know who'd know," Harry said suddenly. Snape turned and raised his eyebrows. "Ginny Weasley and Draco Malfoy were usually working in the dungeons at the same time as Neville. They might know."

"Snape nodded. "Use my office," he said, turning back to Neville. Harry strode quickly from the room and then ran down the corridor, down the marble stairs, through the blurs that the entrance hall and Great Hall had become, to the door to the secret passage to Snape's office, down the steep stairs. This was why he'd started running, he felt. To help a friend in need. He panicked momentarily, unable to find the right place on the damp stone wall to apply pressure. Then suddenly, it gave way and he shoved his shoulder against the wall, squeezing into the room.

"*Incendio!*" he cried with rather more feeling than he should have, as he pointed his wand at the fireplace. His emotions were a runaway train. He reduced the roaring flames that had sprung up in the fireplace to a reasonable level, then, with a shaking hand, threw some powder from the bowl on the mantel into the fire. The flames burned green now, and he said more loudly than was necessary, "The Burrow."

After a few moments, Mrs. Weasley's face appeared.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you! How's your holi--"

"Mrs. Weasley! I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have to talk to Ginny! It's urgent!"

Mrs. Weasley looked unnerved by his behavior; he was always unfailingly polite with her. "Of course," she said softly, then called for Ginny. Mrs. Weasley's head disappeared from the flames, to be replaced by Ginny's. Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail.

"Harry, what--"

"It's Neville. He's in the hospital wing with withdrawal symptoms. Snape wants to know what potions he's been taking, because whatever it was, he became addicted and then stopped, and now he--oh, Ginny, he looks like death--" he whispered.

Ginny blanched. "Well," she said shakily, "he was always working on the same two potions.

One was called something like Youth Or Souse, Youth Are So--"

"Eutharsos Potion?"

"Yes, that's it. I don't know what it's for. And the other was some kind of memory-enhancing potion. Name On Iss, or something--"

Harry had a sudden image in his mind of the page from the Potions text. "Mnemonis Potion?"

"Yes! That's the one. I'm quite sure that's it. Oh, Harry, how bad is it? Will he be all right?"

"I don't know. I need to go tell Snape. Thanks Ginny."

Her face disappeared from the flames and Harry was about to extinguish the fire when he had a sudden thought. He threw some more powder into the firebox and said, "Alastor Moody."

After a few moments, Moody's disfigured face appeared in the flames.

"Yes, Potter?" he said kindly, on seeing who it was.

“Come to the infirmary right away, Professor. It’s Neville Longbottom.”

Moody didn’t answer him. His face had already disappeared. He knew Moody didn’t see the point in small talk at a time like this. Good, Harry thought, he’ll be there fast. Then he wondered how fast, thinking about how far Moody’s office was from the infirmary, and thinking about his wooden leg. Well, Harry reckoned, maybe that’s why he ended the call so quickly.

Harry put out the fire and squeezed out into the passage again, pushing the wall back into place behind him. He realized suddenly that it would have been much easier to find people if he’d simply gone to get his map. Why didn’t he think of that? Or George or Fred? They were all so addled by this unexpected turn of events; Harry felt like he had no brain any more, he was operating on pure animal instinct.

He sprinted up staircase after staircase, finally arriving again at the door to the infirmary. When he pushed it open, he saw that Madam Pomfrey had finally arrived. Dumbledore and McGonagall stood by her side as she poked and prodded Neville, while Snape looked on. Hermione and the twins had retreated to a spot near Pomfrey’s office door along with Angelina and Alicia. Fred discreetly put a piece of parchment into Harry’s hand; he looked at it before stuffing it into his pocket. The map. So they had thought of using it. He nodded at Fred. Not enough people gave the twins credit for being smart, he realized. You don’t just think of all those pranks without being fairly bright. Hermione turned to him with an anguished look on her face. He grimaced, then went to the adults standing around Neville’s bed.

“It’s two potions,” he told them. “Eutharsos and Mnemonis.”

Snape blanched. “Eutharsos Potion is addictive if it is taken in large doses, or too often. And the main ingredient in Mnemonis Potion is ginkgo biloba, which discourages blood clotting. There are other anti-coagulents in it as well. And if a person takes enough of it--”

“What?” Harry wanted to know.

“They lose the ability to form clots at all. Worse than hemophilia.”

“And in combination?”

He turned and looked at Neville again. “That’s what we don’t know.”

Madam Pomfrey backed up from Neville and motioned to Snape, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Harry to join her in her office. Harry glanced over his shoulders at the others, who were not being included in the conference. Being treated as another one of the adults was slightly unnerving; there was something so comforting about being permitted to continue one’s childhood, to let older, wiser people handle the crises. Then he thought of the night, and what he and Hermione had shared. He thought of Voldemort in the graveyard where the elder Tom Riddle was buried...He’d left childhood behind forever.

In the office, Madam Pomfrey turned to them, looking very grim. “He’s in withdrawal from the Eutharsos Potion. That’s my opinion. The Mnemonis Potion is not known to be addictive, although as Professor Snape noted, it can have a disastrous long-term effect. My main concern is that he has only begun the withdrawal process. This is merely the first stage, the greenish skin tone, the yellow eyes, the hallucinations. As it progresses, he will have violent outbursts, followed by crying and laughing jags and suicidal tendencies. We need to keep him restrained and someone should be with him at all times. Should he injure himself and bleed, there is the risk that his abuse of the Mnemonis Potion could lead to his bleeding to death if someone is not on hand to bind up the wound immediately with the right charm. I would feel more comfortable having him transferred to St. Mungo’s--”

“No!” Snape said suddenly. Harry looked at him in surprise. Neville’s parents were in St.

Mungo's. Because of Barty Crouch, Jr. Whom Snape recruited. Harry looked at him searchingly. "He should be with familiar people. I--I will make up a schedule for his friends to sit with him, and any teachers that wish to participate as well. We should of course contact his grandmother." He nodded at McGonagall, who looked like she was taking umbrage at having him make important decisions about a student in her house, although she didn't argue about those decisions. Dumbledore nodded at him.

"I agree. Are you all right with that, Poppy? If we have coverage around the clock?"

She looked at Dumbledore as if she wished he weren't the headmaster, so she could argue with him. "All right," she said reluctantly. They filed out of the office. As Dumbledore explained to the others what Neville needed, Harry felt like he was in a fog. He remembered Neville asking him about *Eupatorium fistulosum* on the day before the ceilidh. Now he remembered why the name of that plant was familiar. It was the main ingredient in Eutharsos Potion. Harry was glad he had only taken it once. Snape had taken it too, when he was in school. Had he also become addicted to it, and gone through withdrawal? Or had he only taken it the one time?

He was vaguely aware of Hermione and Alicia volunteering to canvass all of the students who were still at the school for the holiday, to see who was willing to take their turn at Neville's bedside. Harry turned and looked at Neville again during this frenzied planning. He slowly walked over to the bed and picked up one of Neville's hands; it felt awful, cold and clammy. What if he had decided to take dose after dose of the same potion? That could be me lying there right now, he thought.

"I'm right here, mate," he said quietly to the only one in the school who had beaten him in the Dueling Club. That was probably the potion, Harry realized. But he didn't begrudge him the win; Neville would probably never have another moment like that the rest of his life, if he had a rest of his life...

No. Harry pulled his brain back from this thought. *He'll be fine, he will. He has to be...*

He sat in the chair where Hermione had been, still holding Neville's hand, as if he could will some of his good health to seep into Neville's body that way. Behind him, he heard the others depart, heard Madam Pomfrey go into her office and close the door. He was alone in the infirmary with Neville. Without saying anything, they all knew he'd volunteered to take the first watch. He sat staring at Neville, memory after memory of him flitting through his mind. At one point, he heard Sandy hiss something at him, but he couldn't process it, his mind was whirling, so that he was surprised when he looked up and saw Moody standing at the foot of Neville's bed. That's what she had been telling him; Mad-Eye Moody was coming (although she'd said a cyclops with one leg).

He nodded at Harry. "How is he, Potter?" he said in a low, gravelly voice. Harry explained the two potions to him, the withdrawal process, the round-the-clock vigil that would have to be kept. "But Pomfrey says he'll recover?"

"Yes. He just--" Harry's voice caught.

"That's all right, Potter. Don't try to say more. I understand you found him." Harry nodded.

Moody heaved a great sigh. "I found *them*." Harry looked perplexed for a moment, but then he realized what Moody meant. Neville's parents. After they'd been tortured with Cruciatus by Barty Crouch, Jr. and his Death Eater friends.

"They'd been shopping in Diagon Alley for Christmas presents for their son. He was with them. Not quite two years old at the time. Roly poly, healthy little tyke. Happy as you could wish. When I found them behind a pub in Knockturn Alley, he was bawling away, trying to get his

mother to pick him up. Poor Gemma! She just stared up at the sky, like Frank. I remember going to their wedding...I was at school with Frank's mother, Verity. She was Verity Gillespie then. Verity was heartbroken over what happened to Frank and Gemma. She adored Gemma. Brilliant, beautiful...she'd have adopted her if she could have. No mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tension there!" Moody sighed. "A beautiful, picture-perfect family."

Harry turned and looked at Neville again, at his sickly complexion and eerie eyes. He tried to picture him as a happy toddler, and couldn't.

"I just went to visit them, you know, Frank and Gemma. On Monday," Moody went on. "And now their son will be there too..."

"No!" Harry cried, as vehemently as Snape had. "He'll be fine. He has to!" The tears he'd been holding back finally ran down his cheeks and into the corners of his mouth. He didn't bother wiping them away. He clasped Neville's hand convulsively and glared at Moody. "He'll be fine!"

Moody frowned. "Now, Potter, I'm sure you want to think that. He's your friend; you've known him now for five years..."

"But that's just it," Harry choked. "I haven't known him. None of us have. Seamus and Dean are friends, and Parvati and Lavender, and Ron and Hermione and I...Neville was always the odd man out. I only just last year found out about his parents by accident, and Dumbledore didn't want me to tell anyone. I don't think--I don't think any of us really knows Neville."

Moody nodded. "There's always some like that. Keep to themselves. Well, with what happened, it's not surprising. Especially when that idiot from the Ministry showed up..."

"What?"

"Well, it was a big deal at the time. Frank and Gemma Longbottom! They were the only husband-wife Auror team I knew that could figure out how to balance the work and home situation. They were amazing together. We all figured it must have been a complete ambush for anyone to do what they did to them. And then this idiot shows up, Longlegs, Locklegs, Longheart..."

"Lockhart? Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Yeah. That's the git. Memory charms specialist at the Ministry. Fresh out of school. Decides if he doesn't step in, little Neville, having seen his parents tortured, would be traumatized for life. I tried to stop him, but I couldn't completely, not before some damage was already done. I don't know how bad it would have been if the git had been allowed to do a full-fledged charm on a not-quite-two-year-old. Probably wouldn't have two brain cells left to rub together. I managed to get him sacked after that, thankfully."

Harry stared in disbelief. And Lockhart had almost put memory charms on him and Ron when they were down in the Chamber of Secrets. Thank goodness for Ron's broken wand, he thought, looking at Neville again. So it was a bad Lockhart memory charm that had been hampering Neville's thought processes all this time. And it had finally seemed that he'd gotten over that problem. He must have taken a huge amount of that Mnemonis Potion, Harry realized. Moody patted him on the shoulder and said, "You're a good friend to him, Potter." As he turned to go, Harry thought, *No, I wasn't. But from now on, I will be...*

* * * * *

Harry wasn't sure when he dozed off. His head was on the mattress beside Neville's leg. Neville twitched his hand and hit Harry in the face. He jerked up and looked around just as the door to the infirmary opened. How long had he been asleep? he wondered. He checked on

Neville, who looked the same as before.

Hermione walked over to the bed and put her hand on Harry's shoulder, leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Go get some rest," she said softly. "It's my turn now." Harry checked his watch; it was two o'clock. He looked at the windows, at the spring light and the flowering tree branches visible through the glass. It was only early afternoon. He looked at her, feeling suddenly an overwhelming desire to kiss her, to see her naked...He stopped himself from continuing this line of thought. How could he be thinking that, when Neville...Harry stood and gave her his chair, went to stand at the foot of the bed, looking at Neville, before turning to leave. His hands shook; he felt that he was in withdrawal almost as much as Neville was. Somehow, between the previous night and the morning, he had the feeling that nothing would ever be the same.

The rest of the holiday passed in a blur of sitting by Neville's bedside or sitting around the common room with other shell-shocked-looking people who barely talked, sometimes saying something about Neville, "remember when," stuff, that always seemed to trail off and resulted in someone starting to cry. Harry was sitting by Neville's bedside on Sunday night before the new term was to start when Ginny came running into the infirmary; she dashed to the bed, standing on the side opposite where Harry sat, taking Neville's hand and looking into his face with an alarmed expression that conveyed all of the fears they all held for him.

She asked about his progress shakily; Harry tried to dispassionately tell her the things Madam Pomfrey had explained to Hermione, which she had explained to him. Hermione was impressed that there didn't need to be intravenous fluids for nourishment; such things were carefully Apparated into his body, and the waste was carefully Apparated out as well. Harry grimaced when she told him this, thinking about how many things he took for granted just because he was conscious and walking around and fully-functional. Neville was also levitated for about half the day, floating just an inch or so above the mattress and pillow, an hour on and an hour off, so he wouldn't get bedsores. He hadn't progressed to the second stage of withdrawal yet. Harry dreaded that, dreaded having to restrain Neville and prevent him hurting himself. *It will be all right*, he had to keep telling himself. *He'll be all right*.

"I'm taking this watch," Ginny told him softly. She held Neville's hand and looked at Harry. In spite of his current condition, Harry couldn't help think that Neville was very, very lucky just now. He nodded at her and rose to go, not saying goodbye. She moved to sit in the chair he'd vacated, holding Neville's other hand now, pushing his hair back from his forehead tenderly. The summer term began, and it seemed so strange for Neville not to be in class with them. Many of the teachers were also taking turns at Neville's bedside; once when Harry went into the infirmary, McGonagall was there, another time Flitwick. Hermione told him she found Professor Sprout crying silently while she held Neville's hand. Snape and Moody were also taking turns.

One day, Harry was going into the infirmary to bring Ron his Transfiguration homework, since he had missed class to sit with Neville, and before he could put his hand on the knob, the door flew open and Draco Malfoy came out. Harry tried to stem the wave of anger he felt coming over him when he saw him, remembering the way he'd treated Ginny on her birthday, remembering that he was in the dungeon with Neville and never said anything about the potions he was making.

Malfoy looked at him warily, closed the door of the infirmary. Then he nodded curtly at Harry. "Potter."

“Malfoy.”

He looked back at the door, then at Harry again. “I was just--visiting Longbottom. There weren't any slots open on the sign-up sheet...but then, I thought I probably shouldn't be on there. No other Slytherins were. Have to think about my reputation.”

Harry felt the anger in him starting to get out of control. “He could have died because of you!” he whispered fiercely. Malfoy's jaw dropped.

“Me?”

“You knew what potions he was making...”

“So did Ginny! Neither one of us knew that stuff was addictive.”

“One was addictive. The other simply removes your ability to form blood clots. A paper cut could result in him bleeding to death.”

“Oh, surely not--”

Harry pushed him up against the wall. “If he doesn't recover--”

Malfoy pushed him off. “You'll what?” he shouted. “Stop me from--” then he remembered they were in a public place. He whispered, “Stop me from putting my father in Azkaban? Stop him from turning you into a Death Eater?”

Harry had no response. He stared at Malfoy; if possible, he hated him more than at any other previous time in his life.

“I was just sitting in there,” he pointed at the infirmary, “having a civilized conversation with Weasley, of all people, who, you might remember, I found covered in exploded pub and helped rescue. Don't you get on me about Longbottom! He's--” he faltered. “He's not such a bad bloke. Even if he is after Ginny. I never would have wished this on him. Don't you think I wish I'd known he was doing something dangerous? Don't you think I'd have stopped him?”

“Would you? Do you care about anyone? Ginny turns fifteen, and all you can think is ‘shagging time!’ Is that how you treat people you care about?”

Malfoy looked shocked. “Did she tell you that?”

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. “Never mind.”

Suddenly Malfoy shoved *him* up against the wall and spoke very close to his face. “My relationship with Ginny is between the two of us. You do not talk to me about her. Not if you want my father...”

Harry pushed him off, sending him staggering into the opposite wall. He held his arm painfully.

“Stop telling me you're not planning to do anything to your father. You want him where he can't touch you. That's all the motivation you need.”

Malfoy glared at him. “Maybe. But watch your back; maybe the act I'll catch him in--the one that will get him sent to Azkaban--will be your murder.”

And with that, Malfoy went tripping down the stairs, leaving Harry seething outside the infirmary. He had dropped Ron's homework. He gathered it up, his head whirling as he wondered how capable Draco Malfoy was of carrying out that last threat...

Then, after the first week of the term, Neville entered the second stage. George was sitting with him when he starting flailing around; he gave George a bloody nose and a black eye, and from then on, he was tied securely to the bed. He was eating food now and sometimes talking, but usually it degenerated into incoherent raving, sometimes even cursing, followed by crying and wailing, followed by hysterical laughter.

On the last Saturday of the month, Slytherin and Ravenclaw played their Quidditch match; Slytherin won. Harry watched listlessly as Roger Davies and Draco Malfoy shook hands again

at the end. He was trying to think of Neville, and instead kept thinking of Hermione walking across her dorm room with nothing on...

By the end of the weekend, he had stopped the violent outbursts, but he was still restrained. A week after that, Madam Pomfrey took the restraints off and allowed him to go for escorted walks on the grounds. Finally, a couple of days later, he was pronounced recovered, and released from the infirmary.

Harry would never forget when Neville returned to the common room. He moved slowly; he was very thin and pale, but his eyes were dark blue again. Fred and George escorted him to an armchair, Ginny came and sat down on the floor next to him with her cat, Mackenzie, who was now more than six months old and had the personality of a kitten still, while starting to have the body of a full-grown cat. Mackenzie climbed up the arm of the chair and crept onto Neville's lap. He looked nervous about this, but cautiously reached out to pet the cat, who purred and rubbed the side of her face against his hand. Harry watched with his heart in his throat.

Once back in the classroom, Neville seemed to be a little more alert than he had been before he started taking the Mnemonis Potion, but not as alert as he was on it. Harry realized that that was the other secret to Neville's dueling success; the ability to remember a large number of obscure spells and the ability to think very quickly (because of the potion) when deciding which one to use next. Neville dropped out of the Dueling Club. Harry tried to talk him out of it, to no avail. Neville's first Potions class after he was released from the hospital wing was more than a little tense. Snape did not comment on his absence or the reason for it, but Harry did think it was significant that he was paired up with Malfoy, and that the two of them had been placed at the front of the class, closest to Snape.

Snape was writing the name of the day's potion on the blackboard: Euphemos Potion, page 477 in the potions text. Harry started; that was the potion Ginny and Malfoy were making on the day *he* had made Eutharsos Potion. The day he asked Snape about his mother...

"Potter!" Snape's sharp voice brought him out of his head again. "Give your potions text to Longbottom and Malfoy. They have both forgotten theirs today. I see Granger has hers, so you can share that one."

Harry sighed and carried his book to the front, handing it to Neville, then walking back to the rear work station he was sharing with Hermione. He marveled at Snape's ability to make it seem like Harry was the one at fault for not knowing his potions text was needed up front, delivering it before it was asked for. He also managed to make Hermione sound like she was at fault for *having* her potions text. There was a time when he would have castigated Neville for not having his book. Now he mostly seemed intent on ignoring him.

Harry remembered Snape sitting by Neville's bedside, sometimes checking his pulse, feeling his forehead. Harry wondered how much he blamed himself for what happened to Neville, both when he was a baby and his addiction to Eutharsos Potion. Then Harry realized that Snape may or may not have known about Lockhart's overenthusiastic memory charm work. If he knew, that might explain why Snape didn't like Lockhart. Then Harry realized that no one really needed an *extra* reason to dislike Gilderoy Lockhart.

Harry was brought out of his head again by hearing his name, but this time he heard his first name, not his last. It was Neville. He was handing a small cardboard rectangle to Malfoy, who gaped at it. Both boys turned to look at Hermione and Harry. Sandy hissed at Harry.

"Much will be revealed." What did *that* mean? he wondered. But he didn't dare start talking to her.

Malfoy handed the rectangle to Crabbe, behind him, who *squeaked*, a noise Harry had never heard him make. Harry looked around, wondering where Snape had gone; Then he saw that the office door was open. Snape must have gone to get something. What was Crabbe holding? Why had Neville said his name? He wasn't actually addressing Harry. Crabbe leaned over to Goyle, next to him, showing him the rectangle. Goyle's jaw dropped. He turned and handed it to Parvati, in the row in front of Harry and Hermione. She gasped. She turned it over and read softly; this time Harry heard "birthday," and Hermione's name.

Oh, no no no no no, he thought desperately. *Tell me I didn't leave that in my potions text...* As if in a dream, he watched Parvati hand it to Ron, who was working beside her, with a smirk on her face and an appraising look aimed at Hermione. Harry's stomach clenched as he waited for Ron's reaction. He saw Ron standing utterly still staring at it; he turned it over and moved his lips while silently reading the inscription. Slowly he turned and looked at Harry, stony-faced, then Hermione. He dwelled on Hermione, though.

His expressions were a succession of hurt, betrayal, sadness and anger. Oddly, anger seemed less than the other emotions. Hermione had only met his gaze for a moment, then looked down, coloring.

Harry didn't see Snape come out of the office, but suddenly he was standing next to Ron, holding out his hand expectantly with a grim set to his sallow face. Ron promptly handed the photo to him; Snape's eyebrows rose, and the look of surprise Harry saw on his face was one he'd only seen a few other times. He looked at Hermione, who was still staring down at the table, starting to seem like she was going to cry from embarrassment. Then Snape did it; Harry had felt it coming.

"*Happy Birthday, Harry,*" he read from the back of the photo, his voice dripping with irony, "*With love from Hermione.*"

He held it out to Harry as though it were covered in dung. "I believe this is your property, Potter." Harry took it hastily, shoving it into his rucksack, feeling a heat moving up his face starting from his neck. "And," Snape continued, "Twenty points from Gryffindor for bringing-- inappropriate material to class."

Harry sputtered with the injustice of it; Neville and Malfoy forgot their books and *he* was the one who got points deducted for Gryffindor. Hermione held her lips in a grim line, shaking her head at him almost imperceptibly.

"All right," Snape said now. "For arguing with a teacher--" although he hadn't said a word "-- that will be a detention. Tonight at eight o'clock right here."

Harry was seething now; he had to remind himself that he and Snape were on the same side, they were allies. He looked up to see Malfoy looking smugly at him, then turning a frankly lascivious gaze on Hermione. Harry remembered the Hogwarts express and his reaction to Krum kissing Hermione. Neville also had turned to look at Hermione, as well as Crabbe and Goyle. Of the boys who'd seen the photo of her in her bikini on Corfu, only Ron would not look at her now.

It was worse than the time Snape had read the Rita Skeeter article in class. Harry went through the rest of the class in a daze, only speaking to Hermione when he absolutely had to in order to make the potion. It was bad enough he felt like he wanted her all the time, especially since they hadn't so much as kissed since he found Neville; seeing the photograph again, and knowing that others had seen it was almost unbearably distracting...

When class was over, Ron and Parvati strode out before anyone else, arms around each other's

shoulders. Ron avoided looking at Hermione still. Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a moment, then packed up their potions supplies and cauldrons, the last ones to leave.

"Potter!" Snape said imperiously as he was going out the door. Harry waved Hermione on.

"I'll catch you up."

She nodded and went out; it looked to Harry as though she couldn't bear to meet Snape's eyes. Harry stood waiting, his stomach still roiling with anger from the reprimand he'd received earlier.

If only I'd remembered I was using that photo as a bookmark...

When they were alone, Snape said tersely to him, "Good potions work today, Potter. Twenty points for Gryffindor." First Harry thought, *Has he gotten into the Euphemos Potion? Now he can't say anything that's not nice?* Then Harry realized that that would balance out the points he'd taken earlier. "And--your godfather wanted to speak with you tonight, at eight. My office."

Ah, thought Harry, that explains the detention. The anger that had been like a clenched fist in his stomach suddenly evaporated. He had to stop reacting this way. Snape had no choice but to put on a good show for the Slytherins. And the photo! If he had let it pass without comment of any kind, it would have been most un-Snapelike, which was proving to be a very convenient word, to Harry's mind.

"Yes sir," was all he said to Snape before shouldering his bag to leave. Hermione was waiting for him in the corridor.

"Oh, Harry," she said, tears in her voice, "why did you have to leave that in your potions text?"

They walked up the stairs to the entrance hall. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered. "When Snape told me to give my book to Neville, I forgot it was there..."

They had arrived in the entrance hall now. It was deserted except for one person: Ron. He stood before them, all six-foot-three of him, looking like a volcano getting ready to blow.

"Would you like to explain to me," he said to Harry, "why in the bloody hell you have a photo like that in your bloody potions text?" He turned to Hermione. "And why *you* gave it to him in the first place?"

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Seven Unmasked

Harry and Hermione stared at Ron. He looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Well? Why did you give that photograph to Harry?"

Hermione had been a wreck all through Potions after the photograph of her in the bikini had been passed around. But now it looked to Harry like she was back to herself; he could almost see the wheels spinning in her brain as she prepared to answer.

"I didn't!" she cried. Harry opened his mouth in shock. This he was not expecting.

"What do you mean, you didn't? That *was* your handwriting on the back. I'd know it anywhere. And what did *With love from Hermione* mean?"

"Oh, for pete's sake, Ron! Have you--" she turned to Harry "--or you ever received a card or letter from me that *wasn't* signed that way?"

Ron was clearly thinking about that. "No, I suppose not. Still--"

"Anyway, all I wanted to say is, *now* I know what happened to that photo! I've been missing it since last summer!"

"What?" Ron and Harry said together.

“See, I had a pile of photos, and I thought I’d send one to Harry with his birthday card and present, so I chose this nice shot of the three of us in front of the house where we were staying on Corfu—really amazing, it was built right into the hill, steps going up to the top carved right out of the—”

“Hermione!” Ron interjected.

“All right, all right. I had a couple of copies of the photo I was actually planning to send Harry. I turned over one of them and wrote on the back. Then I did a few other things: wrapped the present, wrote out the card. When I came back to the photo, I thought it felt a little thick, and I discovered that there were two stuck together. I pulled them apart and put the one I’d written on inside the birthday card. I suppose I never looked at the front. I just assumed it was the one I’d selected. I was in a hurry. We were running late. I sealed the envelope and got everything ready to send by owl post. Snuffles helped. I only missed the photo Harry has much later; I assumed I dropped it somewhere. Then, after Bulgaria, worrying about where it was didn’t seem to be important any more.”

Ron looked like he acceded this point; some things *did* pale in comparison to being kidnapped by dark wizards. He turned to Harry.

“So why are you still carrying it around?”

Harry swallowed. They had been planning to *tell* Ron, and now Hermione was lying to him. Should he tell the truth? Harry wondered. He looked at Hermione. Would she ever forgive him if he did? If he told Ron now that they were a couple, chances were it wouldn’t be true in about ten seconds...

“Ron,” he said, having made his decision. “When I got the birthday card, I opened it and that fell out. Dudley picked it up and started—reacting to it. Then he asked me if she was my girlfriend. Well, I was so sick and tired of that from the year before—you know, Rita Skeeter and all—so I just grabbed it from him and told him no, she wasn’t my girlfriend. My potions text was on my desk; I just opened it anywhere and threw the photo in and slammed it shut. I never looked at it. Today was the first time I’d ever actually seen it.”

Ron looked at them through narrowed eyes. “So you’re saying that you didn’t know you sent it to Harry,” he turned to Harry, “and you *never* looked at it?”

“That’s right,” Harry said, while Hermione nodded, her face grim. Ron looked skeptical.

“Because if you two were—you know—you could tell me. I’m not a baby. I could take it.”

Harry’s throat felt tight. *We should have told him!* He looked at Hermione. *Now. Now. Let’s tell him now!* he thought.

But Hermione laughed. “Oh, Ron! We know you’re not a baby.”

“It’s just that—you seem to spend a lot of time together, and—”

“Well, we go running in the morning, sure, but we’d be with you more if you weren’t seeing someone, so that mostly leaves just the two of us. Not that we begrudge you spending time with Parvati,” she said a little shakily. “But—well, we do kind of miss you.”

He smiled now at both of them. Harry felt dreadful. “You’re right, I haven’t been around much. What say we all go down to see Hagrid after classes today, like old times? I was going to spend some time with Parvati, but I’ll make an excuse.”

Harry smiled feebly. “Sure,” he said, sounding more ‘sure’ than he felt. He started to hoist his rucksack onto his shoulder when Hermione stopped him.

“Harry, now that I know where that photo has been—could I please have it back?”

He stopped in shock; he put down the bag and burrowed in it to find where he’d stashed the

photograph after Snape had handed it back to him. He gave it to her and she thrust it into the pocket of her robes. She donned her own bag again and turned her back to them, heading up the marble stairs.

“Come on, you two! We’re already late for Charms!”

Ron clapped Harry on the shoulder as they started to follow her.

“Hey--sorry about all that. Just me being stupid.”

No, thought Harry. *Just you being spot on.*

“S’okay,” Harry said indistinctly as they followed Hermione up the steps.

* * * * *

After Moody’s class, they took their books back to the common room, then went down to Hagrid’s hut (after Ron spoke to a disgruntled-looking Parvati for a minute). He was delighted to see them and started getting the tea things ready as soon as they were in the door. Hermione helped him, getting out the milk jug and some cups and saucers while Harry and Ron set out plates and checked Hagrid’s pantry cupboard for the least rock-like cakes and biscuits available.

They all sat down to eat and drink their tea, laughing merrily about Hermione’s inability to not reel off the history of the English and tea or Harry’s and Ron’s inability to correctly judge the right moment to start drinking, inevitably getting burned tongues with the first sip, resulting in slightly lisping speech for a while.

Then they settled down and looked at each other seriously. Harry raised his tea cup and the others followed suit.

“To Neville,” he said quietly.

“*To Neville*,” Hagrid, Ron and Hermione responded, clinking teacups with Harry and each other. They all drank, then continued with quieter conversation. When it was close to time for the evening meal, they cleared up the tea things and prepared to go back to the castle.

“Coming to dinner, Hagrid?” Hermione asked him. But suddenly, Harry realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Hagrid eat a meal in the Great Hall.

“Nah, I--I have other plans,” he said dodgily.

Harry said, “Oh, going to see your mum?”

Hagrid nodded. “How could I not? Ye know, now that she’s here an’ all, after all this time...”

“Of *course* you should go eat with your mother,” Hermione said with feeling.

“I *do* kinder miss the meals in the Great Hall...” he faltered, looking at them guiltily. “The elves do sech ripping puddings...”

Harry smiled at him. “Any time you want us to nick you something from the kitchens, just let us know. We’re happy to.”

“Definitely,” Ron agreed. Hermione made a face at him.

“You just like the house elves waiting on you hand and foot...” she said just a touch snidely.

“What’s wrong with that?” Ron sounded defensive.

“Say, Ron,” Hagrid interrupted. “Ain’t yer birthday comin’ up soon?”

“On the fifteenth.”

“That’s only a week away! Tell yer what, we’ll have another nice little party here like fer yer sister, and ye won’t have to worry ‘bout folks surprising ye ‘cause I’m telling ye now.”

Ron shrugged. “Sounds good to me. That was great cake we had for Ginny’s party.”

“I’ll get Biddy to make the same again, if you like,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Hagrid said, showing them to the door. “Thanks fer comin’ ter tea.”

“Give your mother our regards,” Harry said as they were leaving.

“I will!” He started to go, then opened the door again. “Say--you three haven’t seen something flying round the school ground’s lookin’ a lot like a golden griffin, have ye? Mum insists one was flyin’ over the giants’ camp a couple of times, but I don’t see how. I mean, they don’t like this part of the world; Dumbledore had that one brought in special...”

Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry, who looked very guilty.

“Uh, no,” said Ron. “It was probably something else. I mean, what are the chances?”

Hagrid laughed. “Yer right, Ron. Only--it’s hard to tell me mum she’s wrong ‘bout anythin’ when I been waitin’ so long ter see her. Nex’ time she mentions it I’ll jest change the subject.”

“Good idea, Hagrid,” Harry said shakily. They all said goodbye to him and he shut the door.

They looked at each other and heaved a collective sigh of relief. They started walking back to the castle.

“What have you been doing, Harry?” Ron wanted to know as they walked. “Buzzing the giants?”

“No, just practicing my flying, so it feels more natural.”

Ron stopped and stared at him. “What’s that like?” he asked softly, sounding a little awed.

“Flying under your own power, no broomstick?”

Harry looked over Ron’s shoulder at the evening sky, at the pink-tinged clouds scudding low over the tree tops on the horizon. “It’s like--a dream. You know, the kind of dream where you imagine you can just lift up your arms and fly. Only--I’m not asleep...”

Hermione grimaced. “For me, it was more like a nightmare...”

Ron laughed. “So, not going to try out for the Quidditch team openings next year?”

Hermione smiled sarcastically. “Very funny.”

They started walking toward the castle again. Ron looked like he was thinking about saying something, then hesitating, then finally coming out with it. “Tomorrow morning, do you think--”

“What?” Harry said, lengthening his stride to match Ron’s long legs.

“Could I come running with you two?”

Harry stopped now. “Running? You?”

Ron looked down at him, obviously offended. “Yeah. What’s wrong with that?”

“Aren’t you the one always calling *us* mad for getting up early to run?”

Ron looked slightly embarrassed. “Parvati’s been telling me I’m too skinny,” he said quietly. He glanced at Hermione, then back to Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Sure. We do warm-ups at six-thirty.”

“Six-thirty!” Ron made a face. Harry laughed.

“Or,” Harry said, “you could use an engorgement charm on your muscles and wind up looking like the Incredible Hulk.”

“The *what*?”

“Sorry. Muggle comic book. Was a television show for a while.”

Ron shook his head, and they resumed walking for a few more paces, but then stopped again when they were right outside the doors to the entrance hall.

“Harry,” Ron said slowly. “I just wanted to say again--I’m sorry for the way I reacted this morning. You know, about that photo...”

Hermione jumped in, a nervous quaver in her voice. “Well, honestly, Ron, you could have used your brain! If Harry thought that a picture like that were in his potions text, do you really think he would have given the book to Neville, especially when he was working right next to

Malfoy?"

Ron looked at her with a strange expression at first, then began laughing. He shook his head and put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"She has a point, Harry. Even *you* aren't *that* daft..."

"Ha ha," Harry laughed unenthusiastically.

Still laughing, Ron entered the hall, Harry and Hermione behind him. Harry frowned at her; this was getting worse and worse, he thought. Ron's going to feel like a complete idiot when he eventually finds out. Harry hadn't been with her for almost a month, but he was starting to feel like it would be worth it to lose her by telling Ron the truth. Although then he would probably lose Ron too, and no longer have any best friends...

* * * * *

Promptly at eight o'clock, Harry reported to Snape's office. He went in through the classroom this time, rather than the secret entrance. Everyone knew he had detention, there was no point in sneaking around.

The door to the office was open, but he closed it upon entering. Snape was grading essays; he put the one he'd just been marking on a large pile to his left, then grabbed one of the two to his right. He was almost done. He didn't look up or say anything to Harry, who went wordlessly to the wing chair by the fire and sat to wait.

When Snape put the last essay into the pile of graded parchments, he looked up at Harry. "The headmaster and Professor Moody will be away for a few days next week, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth. Defense Against the Dark Arts classes will be canceled and Professor McGonagall will be in charge of the school," he said tonelessly. Harry swallowed.

"Why will they be away?"

"Avery's and Nott's trial. Moody's doing preliminary testimony on the fourteenth, the actual trial is on the fifteenth, and, if necessary, the sixteenth will be used for jury deliberations. Unless they simply come back with the verdict on the fifteenth, and frankly, I don't see how they can take more than a few minutes to decide this one."

Harry nodded. "Won't Lupin have to testify too?"

"Remus doesn't signify. Moody left him out of his report. He's unofficial. For that matter, Moody made out he was just visiting the village for the day, having a drink, when his magical eye allowed him to see what Avery and Nott were up to. And since you came along after the fact, Dumbledore convinced the Ministry to leave you out of it, too."

"What will happen to them if the verdict doesn't go their way?"

"They will go to Azkaban, although their sentences may be light due to the cushioning charms preventing any dire injuries."

"You say that like Moody should have let people get hurt to get the Death Eaters in trouble for doing something worse."

"No. But there are undoubtedly things that they have done that are worse, that had worse consequences. Things we may never know about."

Harry nodded. He couldn't see them getting much for blowing up a pub that fell like pillows upon the people within. Maybe they'll have to make restitution to Madam Rosmerta, he thought. Do wizards have lawsuits? he wondered. He realized he was dreadfully ignorant of wizarding law.

Suddenly, Sirius' head appeared in the fireplace. "Harry! Thanks for getting him here, Severus. How are you, Harry?"

He smiled at his godfather. "Fine." His voice shook a little; he was actually not feeling particularly well since he and Hermione had told Ron what he now thought of as The Great Flaming Lie. Rather like The Great Fire of London. Which, he felt, would prove to be the lesser disaster by the time this was over. His stomach had been in knots all day, not particularly helped along by the stale biscuits he'd had at Hagrid's, plus Hagrid telling them about his having been seen flying by the giants.

"Are you sure?" Sirius seemed to see something in Harry's face which disturbed him. Harry looked at Snape in desperation.

"I'm afraid I rather embarrassed Harry and Hermione in class today. Purely for the purpose of giving him a detention, to get him here at this time. I'm sure he'll get over it." He looked at Harry with one eyebrow raised, and Harry knew he'd better get over it *now*. He smiled feebly. "I'm fine. Just--like he said. A bit embarrassed," he told Sirius, who smiled sympathetically. "Severus has to worry about his reputation, you know, Harry. You're mature enough to understand that."

"Why did you need to talk to me, Sirius?"

He sighed and looked as if he'd rather be kissed by a dementor. "Harry, I know you won't want to hear this, but--I want to pull you out of school for the rest of the year."

"*What?*"

"Hear me out. I said that *I* want to. I'll give you my reasons in a moment, but if you don't want to, that will be that. But I want to tell you my thinking first. Please?"

Harry nodded, his throat tight. Whatever it was, it had to be bad for Sirius to want to take such a drastic step. "Lucius Malfoy is getting very aggressive about recruiting younger people for the Death Eaters. Percy Weasley has been targeted."

"Percy!"

Sirius nodded. "He received an owl post last night. He is to report to Knockturn Alley next Saturday to meet someone who will take him to another location to hear his answer. There's no chance of replacing him with an operative in disguise--since our little debacle on Christmas night, the Death Eaters are doing elaborate tests now to ascertain the true identity of anyone attending a meeting. If he goes and agrees, he gets the Dark Mark and becomes a Death Eater; if he goes and refuses, he gets killed. If he doesn't go--"

"What?"

"Well, we know of two families already that have been destroyed because a young man and a young woman who recently graduated from Hogwarts were being recruited. They aren't even bothering with torture first, to coerce them. Just one chance is being given. One was a girl who finished the same year as Percy, Penelope something..."

"Penelope Clearwater?"

"Yes. Did you know her?"

Harry swallowed. "She's Percy's girlfriend. Last summer, Ron told me they were seeing each other again. What happened?"

"Well--" he sighed. "She received the letter, same as Percy. But she didn't tell anyone. Just panicked, then locked herself up in her flat when the time came and quietly killed herself. Left a note explaining why."

"No!" Harry felt tears streaming down his face. He remembered Penelope, in her black robes and prefect badge. She had been petrified by the basilisk at the same time that Hermione was. Percy was probably devastated, and now he was also being recruited.

“That’s not all. When she didn’t show, Malfoy sent Death Eaters over to her parents’ house. They were all killed. The Dark Mark was over the house. We don’t know who did it precisely. Mother, father, grandfather and a little brother. There was a big age difference between him and Penelope. He would have started at Hogwarts next year. Memory charms specialists eradicated witnesses’ memories of the Mark. The Ministry is still determined to cover up Voldemort’s return to prevent panic. I say, sometimes it’s *appropriate* to panic...”

Harry was crying freely, hearing of the destruction of the Clearwater family. “Who else?” he choked.

“A young man who was actually a Slytherin. Used to be captain of the Quidditch team. Marcus Flint.”

“Flint? Flint refused to become a Death Eater?”

Sirius shook his head. “You can’t judge a wizard just by his house these days, Harry. Evidently he was quite a good Quidditch player, got a job as a reserve player with Pride of Portree, the team over on the Isle of Skye. The Prides are very good, have a very loyal following.” He bowed his head. “All the poor kid wanted to do was play Quidditch, you know? His own dad is a Death Eater, turns out. He went to Skye, where the team was having practice, and tried to bring his son to Malfoy. Wound up killing him instead. There were witnesses. He’s gone underground; there’s a manhunt on now for him, but the *Daily Prophet* won’t have anything about it until tomorrow morning--this just happened last night--and I’ll bet you they just depict it as a family squabble or something. Trouble is, because Marcus didn’t show up, some Death Eaters went over to the Flint house and his mum and a houseguest staying there are dead now. Malfoy didn’t know Marcus’ dad was going to try to fetch him to comply. Obviously the elder Flint knew what would happen if Marcus didn’t. Now he’s on the run from Malfoy and Voldemort and the other Death Eaters as well as the Ministry. And I thought *I* had it bad...of course, I didn’t kill my own son while trying to convince him to become a Death Eater, so I’m not going to waste any time feeling sorry for him.”

Not that it did Karkaroff much good to run from Voldemort, Harry thought. He took a deep breath. He removed his glasses, wiped his eyes with his sleeve, then replaced them. Even the families of Death Eaters weren’t safe. He realized that Draco Malfoy had had no choice but to get the Dark Mark on Christmas night. Otherwise, he too would probably have been killed by his own father. He thought of poor Marcus Flint, whom he had never liked, but who had stood up to his own father and refused to be a Death Eater, and died because of it. Somehow, he thought, people had to find out about what really happened to him. People had to know what really drove poor Penelope to kill herself, and who killed her family, who fired the Dark Mark over their house, and the Flint house.

“Percy,” Harry said with a shaky voice. “What’s he going to do? And--what about the other Weasleys?” He felt like he was going to throw up. He thought of the Burrow with the Dark Mark over it; he thought of Bill, tall and handsome and laughing at the ceilidh; he thought of Charlie with the dragons when he’d done the first task at the tournament the year before; he thought of the twins and Ron and--
And Ginny.

“Why don’t you have Lucius Malfoy yet?” he demanded, practically sobbing it. Sirius heaved another great sigh; he had dark circles under his eyes, Harry noticed.

“It’s not for lack of trying, Harry. Our operatives know Malfoy is doing these things, but we don’t have any solid evidence to nail him. The Ministry is being very pigheaded about wanting to

find benign, non-Voldemort-related explanations for everything that's been happening.”
“When they thought you'd killed that street of Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, they just hauled you off without worrying about evidence.”

Sirius grimaced. “Those were different times. And it's quite possible that even if a pack of Aurors swooped down over Malfoy Manor this second, all they'd find is an apparently respectful wizarding household with old money, maybe a few more Dark Arts artifacts than there should be, but nothing connecting Lucius Malfoy to anything illegal. He's covered his tracks well, has Malfoy. Quiet a puppeteer.”

Harry tried to regain his composure, only partly succeeding. “Why do you want to take me out of school? Shouldn't you be worrying about Percy and the Weasleys?”

Sirius looked at him, not speaking. Harry looked back at him, then turned to Snape, who looked grimmer than Harry had ever seen him--and that was saying something.

“What?”

Sirius began to speak slowly. “Harry. Brace yourself. One of our operatives saw a piece of owl-post being prepared that you should receive tomorrow morning. It will be a letter in a black-bordered parchment envelope. With a wax seal shaped like the Dark Mark.” Harry sucked in his breath. “Yes,” Sirius nodded at him. “It's official. You are being recruited.”

His head was swimming. “How long will I have?” he choked out.

“I don't know. Percy received his letter last Saturday, so he'll have two weeks total. I rather get the impression they may accelerate your--schedule.”

“But even if you take me out of school, what good will that do? What about Ron and Hermione? Won't they still be in danger? And then there's the whole Weasley family...”

“So you won't leave Hogwarts?”

“Leave? It's safe as bloody houses here, Sirius. We should move the whole Weasley family *in* to protect *them*. And what about the Grangers? Are they still safe?” He saw Sirius look toward Snape. Harry turned to him.

“I assure you that the Grangers are perfectly safe and that no one save I knows where they are,” Snape said softly.

“You?”

“I am their secret-keeper.”

Harry's jaw dropped open. They were hiding using the Fidelius Charm, and Snape was their secret keeper! Well, Harry thought, certainly no one would suspect Snape of being the person to fill such a role.

“Percy has met with Dumbledore,” Sirius told him. “If your deadline falls after his, he is willing to get the Dark Mark and go undercover for us. Considering that he's probably grieving for Penelope, I think that's a very brave thing to do. He is, of course, concerned about protecting his family. The question is, how soon will Malfoy want *you* to decide...”

Snape stood and walked to the mantel. “Harry can come here after breakfast and before class tomorrow morning and we can call you and discuss it once we know what is in the letter. Perhaps Percy Weasley can contact Malfoy, indicate that he will comply, take care of it sooner than next Saturday.”

Sirius looked like he was thinking about that. “Seems risky. Malfoy might suspect he's up to something. He likes to control the schedule. He'll be suspicious of someone like Percy wanting to *move up* the date for his getting the Dark Mark.”

Harry's hands were shaking. It was all happening too fast. He'd wondered for months when

Voldemort or Malfoy would make their move, and suddenly they were, and he wasn't prepared. He didn't even feel sane. He felt mostly like collapsing into a puddle on the floor. Then he had a thought. It formed in his mind slowly, then took full form and became an actual plan.

"Harry?" Sirius said. "You look odd. Are you all right?"

"Malfoy."

"Yes, Malfoy's doing all this, we just can't prove it..."

"No. I mean Draco Malfoy."

"Draco Malfoy?"

"Well, you know he's been trying to figure out a way to catch his dad in some act that will get him put away in Azkaban for a very long time. I need to talk to Malfoy--to Draco, that is, and get him to fix the schedule. You're right, Percy asking to get the Dark Mark early would be suspicious. If he does go undercover, he shouldn't look too eager. But Draco Malfoy could tell his father that there's a particularly opportune time to come and get me...only it would be a trap."

"I forgot about Malfoy's son....And he certainly wouldn't want his dad to harm Ginny's family, from what you told me of those two. Well, he certainly has the motivation to keep the Weasleys safe. The question is, can he do it? Will his dad listen to him?"

"That's what I don't know."

Sirius sighed again. "I think the first thing we have to do is see what's in your recruitment letter tomorrow."

Harry nodded. Snape looked down at Sirius' head in the firebox. "Will that be all, Sirius?"

"That's all for now. Good night, both of you. And Remus says hello. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Good night, Sirius," Harry said softly before his head vanished. He looked up at Snape. The Grangers' secret keeper. He'd had the thought before that he should have been his parents' secret keeper. He hoped the Grangers would be all right...and the Weasleys.

Snape looked back impassively. "I've more essays to grade, Potter. Move along with you. Get back to Gryffindor Tower."

Harry nodded and went to the door. Then he remembered something and stopped, turning around. "Oh--if anyone asks what I did for detention, what should I tell them?"

Snape sat at his desk and looked thoughtful. "Tell anyone who asks that you had to chop roots or something for my stores. Surely you can think of something?"

Harry nodded; Snape was on edge. Perhaps he was remembering being recruited by Malfoy during his seventh year.

"Good night, sir. And--thank you."

Snape whipped his head up; his dark eyes shone in the candlelight. He looked surprised, and--Harry was having a hard time identifying the emotion--touched.

"You're welcome," he said evenly. "Good night, Harry."

Harry turned and left, closing the door behind him. He was climbing the marble stairs leading up from the entrance hall when he stopped and realized that Snape had called him "Harry" when talking *to* him and not *about* him for the first time. He smiled to himself. Snape was starting to grow on him. He and Sirius didn't even trade gibes any more; they were perfectly civil to each other, even when making suggestions for action on which they didn't agree.

He continued up the stairs, wishing he could use a Time Turner to go back to the morning, again and again, live this day over and over, never having to go forward, never having to get to

tomorrow morning's owl post and a certain black-trimmed parchment envelope...

* * * * *

The next morning, they walked considerably more slowly back to the castle after Ron came along with them for his first run. The warm-down exercises had helped Ron somewhat, and he was able to imitate the pull-ups Harry was doing under the Quidditch bleachers, but he wasn't succeeding in hiding how winded he felt as he walked beside the two of them, while they were breathing normally and looking quite refreshed from the run. Ron tugged ineffectually at the heavy front door to the castle, then stepped aside as Harry pulled on it and it pivoted open. Then Harry, Ron and Hermione stopped dead; Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were loitering idly near the foot of the marble stairs. Funny, Harry thought; first time I've seen all three of them together outside class for a while. He wondered whether the two large boys had already been recruited. Malfoy looked up with an evil grin when he saw the three of them, then he primarily focused on Hermione in her running clothes. Now that it was warmer, she had gone back to using a running bra and very tight bicycle shorts. After almost a year of running practically every morning, Harry thought she looked more incredible than ever, and Malfoy was registering this on his face also. I wish Ginny could see that, he thought. Then Malfoy's evil grin shifted to the exhausted Ron.

"So! Weasley! I saw that you got a real good look at that photo. Commit it to memory? Because I know that I can conjure it up in *my* brain--" he tapped his temple "--any time I want. And Potter, well...of course he can picture even more any time *he* wants..."

Harry froze at Malfoy's words and looked at Ron, who was turning red. If he thought Ron didn't have the strength to attack Malfoy after the morning run, he got rid of that idea as soon as Ron dove at Malfoy. He grabbed him by the upper arms and pushed him up against a wall. Crabbe and Goyle started after him, but Harry pulled his wand out of his sock and pointed it at each of them in quick succession, putting the *Impedimenta* curse on them. Now they were both still heading toward Ron and Malfoy, but very, very slowly, so that their movements were indiscernible.

Malfoy swallowed while up against the wall with Ron inches from his face. "What did you have to do that for?" he said to Harry.

Harry gave him a lopsided ironic smile. "Yeah, I suppose slowing those two down is kind of redundant, isn't it?"

Hermione guffawed, and then after a moment Harry joined her. Harry had not told them about the post he was expecting; he had tried to be cheerful all the previous evening and all morning, not letting on that anything was wrong. Ron was still looking very serious. He told Malfoy, "Harry and Hermione are friends. Not that you'd understand being friends with a girl. You think they're only good for one thing."

"What would you know about my personal life? And remember--your sister is my friend. So if what you're saying is true, I should be seeing a lot more action from your sister than I have been...oof!"

Ron brought his knee up into Malfoy's groin; Harry flinched involuntarily. He thought he would probably react that way even if it were Voldemort getting a knee in the groin. The very thought was just too...

"You don't talk about my sister! And you don't talk *to* my sister, ever again, you dirty, slimy little snake..."

Harry heard Sandy hissing at him, but he was distracted, so he asked her to repeat what she'd

said. Maybe it was important, something that was about to happen in the entrance hall...
“I said, tell your friend that snakes are some of the cleanest creatures there are,” she said with an injured tone to her voice.

Ron whirled on hearing Harry speak Parseltongue, and then hearing Sandy’s hissing. “What is it?” he wanted to know. “Is she--?” Ron looked at Malfoy, whose arms he was still holding against the wall; he didn’t want Malfoy to know about Sandy’s Sight.

“Nah, it’s not that. She’s just--a little upset about what you said. She wants you to know that snakes are actually quite clean.”

“Oh. Can you tell her I’m sorry?”

“He’s sorry, Sandy,” Harry hissed to her.

“I heard him. We’re also not slimy,” she hissed with that hurt voice again.

“Yes, yes,” Harry said a little impatiently. “He’s very sorry, Sandy.”

Malfoy scowled. “Do you wear that damn snake all the time, Potter?”

Harry scowled back. “Do you wear that *face* all the time, Malfoy?”

Even Ron laughed now, stepping back from Malfoy and letting him go. Malfoy rubbed both upper arms simultaneously. Harry, Ron and Hermione walked up the marble stairs together.

“Hey!” Malfoy called after them. They turned; he stood at the foot of the stairs where Crabbe and Goyle were still making infinitesimal progress toward where Ron had been back when Harry had put the curse on them. “Aren’t you going to do anything about them?”

Harry looked back and forth between Crabbe and Goyle, who looked like very ugly statues. “I see no difference.” He smiled at Ron and Hermione, who were laughing again, and they continued their progress up the stairs, hearing Malfoy behind them saying, “*Finite Incantatem!*” to remove the spell from his companions. Harry still felt heavy-hearted, but he did his best to put on a cheerful face, he laughed with the others while feeling hollow inside. The three of them going running together was a good idea. He was glad Ron had joined them; he felt like they were pulling him back into the fold. Perhaps when they did tell him about their relationship, he really would be okay about it...and hopefully, he could find a way to convince Malfoy to accelerate the schedule for putting his father away.

* * * * *

Harry was having trouble eating his breakfast. He kept looking at the food on his plate, thinking, *This is my favorite breakfast*, but he couldn’t eat a bite. He looked up at the open windows just under the enchanted ceiling, showing a pleasantly blue spring sky with a few fluffy white clouds scudding across it. Finally, it happened; one small dark owl flew in a window, then several more owls fluttered in, then all at once it was the usual storm of wings and feathers and packages and scrolls of parchment, as the messengers winged their way toward their destinations. Then Harry spotted a falcon, not an owl, carrying a large crisp parchment envelope edged with black. Here it comes, he thought, his heart in his throat. But it didn’t; the falcon swept over to the Ravenclaw table and dropped the envelope in--Roger Davies’ hands. Harry opened his eyes wide. Maybe it hadn’t been Roger sending the school owls to Draco Malfoy before, but he was certainly being recruited now. This was getting worse and worse. He looked at Roger’s face; he was sitting next to his brother Evan, who seemed to be asking him about the mail he’d received. Roger shrugged and shoved it into his rucksack, evidently planning to read it later. Perhaps, Harry thought, Sirius’ intelligence was wrong and I’m not the one being recruited today. We need to help the Davies family, Harry thought, before they all get killed...

But suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder; it was another falcon, digging his talons in

(Harry was sure he'd drawn blood) and then dropping a large cream-colored parchment envelopment with a black border on his lap. Harry winced again as the bird dug its claws in even more to prepare to take off again. Harry didn't watch it go; he looked down at the envelope.

Mr. H. Potter
Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry
The Great Hall
Gryffindor Table

He broke the black wax seal, taking note of the image of the serpent and skull that had been pressed into it. Then he opened the large creamy envelope and pulled out a heavy piece of parchment. There were only ten words on it.

Touch your wand to this page and say your name.

Harry looked around. Everyone seemed to be too busy to take any notice of him. Hermione was reading most of the *Daily Prophet*, except for the Quidditch page, which Ron was perusing. Will was wolfing down his food hurriedly as usual. Ginny had her nose in a book, while next to her, Amy and Andy bickered good-naturedly. Colin Creevey was talking football to his brother Dennis, and Harry saw with interest that Jules Quinn was staring at Dean Thomas' sister Jamaica (who was very pretty, Harry thought, even at eleven). Ruth Pelta was asking Zoey Russell about their Arithmancy homework, and Fred and George and the other seventh years were talking about the upcoming N.E.W.T.s.

Harry surreptitiously pulled out his wand and said softly, "Harry Potter."

The words on the page disappeared. New words slowly formed in place of the earlier instructions.

Unable to verify identity due to whispering.

You must use a normal voice.

Change your location if necessary.

Then this message too faded. The parchment was blank. Then the original message slowly reappeared, looking as if it had always been there.

Harry looked up at the staff table. He met Snape's eye. He met Dumbledore's as well. The headmaster nodded at him. Snape rose and went to the door to the secret passage. Harry put the letter in his rucksack and stood, swinging it on his back.

"Tell Hagrid I'll be a little late," he said to Ron, striding out of the Great Hall before Ron could answer. He practically ran down the steps to the dungeons.

Snape's office door was open. Harry walked in, not waiting for an invitation, then closed it, also not waiting to be told. He took the letter out of the bag and laid it on the desk blotter. Snape read it in a quick glance, then looked at Harry. He took out his wand and touched the page.

"Harry Potter," he said in the closest thing to a normal voice he could muster, considering how unnerved he felt. The ten-word message disappeared once more and the page was blank. Then, slowly another message appeared.

You have been chosen to serve the Dark Lord. Be in the Hogwarts library at six-forty-five on Friday evening. Come alone. You will receive further instructions at that time. Touch your wand to this parchment when you are done reading and say your name once more.

Snape stared down at the parchment. He drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently. Then he threw his hands in the air. "Gah! How long do we have to wait for another message to appear?"

Harry looked down at the parchment. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, 'what do you mean?'" Snape asked, then looked slightly embarrassed by how silly that sounded. "It's still blank. How long do we have to wait for a new message?"

Harry looked down at the parchment, then back up at Snape. "It looks blank to you?"

Snape looked jolted. "It doesn't look blank to you?" he asked Harry, then looked down at it again.

"No," Harry answered. "It says I'm supposed to be in the school library at six-forty-five tomorrow night to get more instructions."

"It does? Is that all?"

"Well, it also says I've been chosen to serve the Dark Lord and to touch my wand to the paper and say my name again when I'm done reading it."

"It must be charmed so that only you can see it once your identity is verified...well, do it. Touch it again and say your name; let's see what happens."

Harry touched the letter with his wand and said his name again. Immediately, black flames arose from the letter and envelope, consuming them both. Not even ashes remained to show that they had ever existed. Even the wax seal was gone. The parchments that had been sitting nearby on Snape's blotter were unharmed; the blotter itself was not scorched either.

"Well," Harry said, staring down at the desk. "There's not much to tell Sirius, is there? I'd better get to Hagrid's class. Perhaps you could call Sirius for me?" Snape nodded and moved to the fireplace. Before he left, Harry remembered Rogers' letter. "Professor--" he said suddenly, turning back. "I almost forgot. It looked like Roger Davies also got a letter. It was also delivered by a falcon."

Snape, if possible, looked paler. "You didn't say yours was delivered by a falcon. Lucius Malfoy keeps falcons. He's recruiting our Head Boy while he is still in school?" He rubbed his hand over his chin, frowning, deep in thought. "I'll talk to the headmaster about keeping an eye on him."

"And his family," Harry said. "They'll be in danger."

Snape looked levelly at Harry. "Only if he refuses." Harry swallowed. Snape said that as though it were unlikely.

"Are there Death Eaters in his family?"

"Not that I know of. I just--have a bad feeling about Davies."

"What about his brother Evan? Do you think they'll try to recruit him too?"

Snape shook his head. "Too young--"

"He's in fifth year, like me and Draco Malfoy. And he's a prefect too, and an even better dueler than Roger."

"You and Draco Malfoy are in the Prophecy. That is different."

Harry nodded, accepting this. "Well, tell Sirius I'm sorry I missed him. We're reviewing the last three years of Care of Magical Creatures for the O.W.L.s, so I'd better go now--"

"Don't--" Snape said abruptly. Harry jerked his head around. "Don't tell anyone about that letter. *Anyone.*"

Harry nodded. He meant Hermione. And Ron too. He wondered whether Snape suspected how deeply involved he and Hermione had become. Then Harry remembered Snape looking at the photograph from Corfu. He probably suspected. For Harry, it was actually becoming a bit of a dim memory. It was as though he'd dreamt it all...

When he reached Hagrid's hut, the fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins were seated on benches

laid out in a semi-circle before Hagrid's garden, taking notes about unicorns and hippogriffs. Harry tried to catch Draco Malfoy's eye before sitting down, but he wasn't looking in the right direction. He took a seat between Ron and Hermione which they'd saved for him. He listened dimly to the things Hagrid said; only doodles seemed to come out of his quill. Mostly he looked back and forth between Ron and Hermione. He hadn't told Snape or Sirius, but he had already decided, like Percy, that he would do whatever was necessary to ensure their safety. Even-- Getting the Dark Mark.

* * * * *

Harry walked to a table in the far corner of the library and sat down. He checked his watch. It was six-thirty. He'd eaten dinner quickly, then slipped away and run up the marble stairs to the library. The day had lasted forever. First there was Potions, with Snape throwing him worried glances and Hermione giving Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy the evil eye whenever they started ogling her, which was far too often for both Harry and Ron. They were still needling her about the photo; Neville had apologized to her for handing it to Malfoy in the first place, but the damage was done.

Charms was wall-to-wall O.W.L. review, and Harry was pleasantly surprised by how many spells were second nature to him now, especially after he'd absorbed so much for the Triwizard Tournament and now the Dueling Club. But he couldn't help stealing looks at Flitwick, still wondering who'd put that spell on the Charms doorway.

He could barely choke down lunch, and then Transfiguration was more review, and Moody's class was also. This was a little more difficult, though, since they hadn't had the same teacher the whole time, as they had for the other classes. Hermione was the only one who knew anything about werewolves, Moody discovered, and nothing particularly useful had been learnt from Lockhart during their second year. For reasons Harry understood all too well, Moody didn't even want them to use the Lockhart books for reference, which they could have done, Harry thought. Even though he hadn't banished any banshees himself, Lockhart had quite accurately written down the methodology used. Harry thought he might refer to the books anyway, without telling Moody. He could skip over the self-aggrandizing bits. After all, he'd already paid good money for the books, and there was information in them he'd need to know. Harry looked around the deserted library. It was six-thirty-five. He was on the verge of going into spasmodic table-drumming mode if someone didn't show up soon. He reached out toward the shelves nearest him and pulled a random book down. He flipped open the cover and started to read, just for something to do. The book was, not coincidentally, about dark wizards and some of the things they'd done. Harry opened the book in the middle and started reading.

One of the most feared dark wizards of the sixteenth century was well known in the Muggle world as well, but not as a wizard. Pere Juillet De Pems Marvolo was a direct descendent of Salazar Slytherin and commanded great respect in the Loire Valley, where he was the abbe of St. Jean Batiste, a Benedictine monastery. Marvolo began his reign of terror with scourges to clear Jews out of the local countryside in 1537, exactly twenty years after Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg, progressing to a minor inquisition that targeted any remotely heretical sect, including many of Luther's followers, and evolved into witch burnings (although all of the accused were known by the magical community to be Muggles).

Like many clerics of the day, wizard or Muggle, Marvolo kept a mistress and fathered a number of illegitimate children, whom he openly acknowledged. He had hoped to

advance to the position of cardinal, and thence to the papacy, but with the rise of Lutheranism and later the Council of Trent came a desire in the Church to at least appear to frown upon such practices as priests keeping mistresses and supporting families. In 1560, three years before the Council of Trent finally came to a close, Marvolo was stripped of his post as abbe and excommunicated.

Having lost the means to acquire power in the Muggle world (we may be grateful he did not become pope) Marvolo took on a new persona. Rearranging the letters of his name, along with his clerical title, he was able to turn "Pere Juillet De Pems Marvolo" into the statement, "Je m'appelle Sieur Voldemort," or, in English, "I am Lord Voldemort."

As Voldemort, Marvolo swept across the French countryside, wreaking havoc and leaving behind his mark: a serpent and skull. The magical authorities were at a loss for what to do about Marvolo. Finally, an Auror who had been hunting him for years killed one of his sons before Marvolo's very eyes. Marvolo immediately performed the Enuma Elish spell to resurrect him. The Auror's eyewitness account:

"He summoned the large snake which accompanied him everywhere and spoke to it in Parseltongue. The huge creature put its tail in its mouth, forming a circle around the Dark Lord and his dead son, whom he clasped in his arms. He raised his wand to the heavens, saying, 'Enuma Elish! Tiamat! Apsu!'

"As he spoke the words, a terrible rumbling emanated from the heavens. Dark clouds gathered overhead and lightening flashed with the final word of the Dark Lord's incantation. A bolt of lightening struck the ground at his feet and seemed to create the fissure which now opened there. The ground opened wider and wider, the sound of thunder from overhead becoming so deafening that I had to cover my ears. Then, his son in his arms, he jumped into the abyss. I waited, but they did not return. He did not succeed in saving his son, or himself. The rift in the earth healed itself and the great serpent slithered away. I spread the word in the countryside that the dreaded Voldemort (for I no longer feared to speak his name) was no more, and there was great rejoicing in the wizarding world."

Some twenty years later, the same Auror claimed to have spotted Marvolo in an auberge in Lyons, and tried to convince the magical authorities that he had been mistaken about Marvolo being gone. However, even if it was the wizard who had styled himself Voldemort, he no longer seemed to be a threat to the wizarding or Muggle worlds, and the Auror was advised to retire, due to his advanced age (one-hundred seventy-three) and delusional tendencies.

Harry swallowed; when had the book been published? It didn't look especially old or worn. He turned to the front. It was printed by Sweetbriar Publishing when he was five years old. Out of curiosity, he turned to the index, looked for the P's. There; he'd found the entry. *Potter, Harry*, pages 532-534.

He thought about turning to those pages, to see what the book said about him, but he thought he heard hissing. That's strange, he thought. Have I lost the ability to understand Sandy?

"Sandy?" he said to her softly.

"Yes, Harry Potter?"

"What is it?"

"What is what?"

"What did you say to me?"

“I did not say anything to you. I was sleeping.”

“Oh. Sorry, Sandy. Go back to sleep.”

“Is that all? You woke me up to find out whether I was awake?”

“Not exactly, Sandy. Sorry.”

Harry looked around him; he heard the hissing again. He realized that it was a human making a hissing noise, and it was coming from behind the shelves where he'd found the book he'd just been reading. He picked up the book in his arms; he planned to check it out. Ron and Hermione would be very interested in what he'd just read about the other Voldemort. He went around the shelves and found Draco Malfoy waiting there. “About time, Potter. I thought you spoke snake.”

“I do, Malfoy. You're the one who doesn't.”

Malfoy sneered. “Fat lot of good it's done you.” Harry bit his tongue to keep from telling him about Sandy's Sight. “Listen, Potter. We have to talk.”

“About my recruitment letter?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, then. What are my instructions?”

Malfoy grimaced. “That's just it. There are no instructions. You received the standard letter...”

“There's a standard Death Eater recruitment letter?”

“Get over it. But you aren't going to be given a time and place to come to and give your answer.”

“Why?”

“My dad thinks of you as--a special case. Doesn't want you to have any time to prepare. When it happens, you won't know ahead of time.”

Harry shook his head. “Listen, I don't care about myself. I just don't want anyone else hurt. Can you at least tell me whether you think it will be before next Saturday?”

“No, I can't. Why?”

“Because we need to get your dad put away before then. That's when Percy Weasley is supposed to report. He's been recruited.”

“*What?*” Malfoy looked terrified. “How do you know?”

“I can't tell you that. You look like you didn't know.”

He shook his head, dazed. “I didn't...Do you know what he plans to do?”

“No,” Harry lied. “But I do know that your dad has already had two families killed because he didn't get the recruits he wanted. You read about Marcus Flint, I suppose? It was in this morning's *Daily Prophet*.”

“It didn't say anything about my dad or the Dark Lord...”

“Of course it didn't, you prat! The Ministry's still in denial about all this. Flint didn't want to be a Death Eater, and his dad killed him.”

Malfoy sank down. “Man...Flint...”

Harry looked down at him. “Can we get your dad before next Saturday? Before the entire Weasley family is put at risk?”

He looked up at Harry. “I don't know. I'll see what I can do...” But he looked worried.

“Let me know when it'll be...”

“No.” Malfoy stood again.

“No?”

“My schedule, Potter, not yours. Element of surprise. If you look the least bit like you've been

expecting this, my dad will kill me first and then you and whoever else happens to be standing around.”

Harry looked at him shrewdly. “I’m still not sure why I should trust you...”

“Good. Keep thinking that. Treat me as anything other than your worst enemy, and my dad’s sure to pick up on it.”

“Are you going to ask him about Percy?”

Malfoy shook his head. “Can’t afford to. He hasn’t been telling me about his other recruits. You’re the only one I’m in on.”

“That might change.”

“Why?”

“I saw Roger Davies get a recruitment letter this morning.”

Malfoy snorted. “Well, that’s probably overdue, isn’t it? He’s probably more evil than my dad, in some ways...”

“So you didn’t know? And you don’t know where and when he’s supposed to give his answer?”

Malfoy shook his head. “No idea. This has gone on long enough. I should go before people start coming in here again. Dinner’s almost over.”

“Right,” Harry said, turning and walking away from him with no other leave-taking. He went to the desk and waited for Madam Pince to process the book he was borrowing, then left the library, returning to the Gryffindor common room to wait for Ron and Hermione. He wished he had something he could tell Snape and Sirius, but all he could say was that sometime in the next week, he would be ambushed. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, and he felt another wave of Moody-esque paranoia sweep over him. He opened the book to the middle and reread the entry on the other Lord Voldemort. Somehow, the fact that Tom Riddle wasn’t terribly original wasn’t especially comforting...

* * * * *

Hermione was in fact very interested in the book Harry had borrowed from the library. “Why doesn’t Binns teach us this? All we ever seem to cover is goblin rebellions in England...”

Harry listened to her talk, wanting to be alone with her, to talk to her, figure out what they were going to do about Ron, before he or she or Ron or all of them were ambushed and killed by Lucius Malfoy, and went to their graves without telling Ron the truth. Had she somehow decided that the night they’d spent together was a mistake, was she trying to forget it? Harry wondered whether he could do the same, just go on as if nothing had happened.

The days dragged on, it seemed to Harry. Tuesday night, he wrapped Ron’s birthday present to give him the next day. There wasn’t much time left before Saturday. He tried to picture Percy in the circle of Death Eaters, having the Cruciatus Curse put on him, getting the Dark Mark. No. It mustn’t happen. Percy was annoying, but he didn’t deserve that. Harry realized that Percy might just feel he had nothing left to live for with Penelope gone. Snape had joined after losing his mum. Was Percy really going to be a spy, or was he going to be a Death Eater in earnest? Harry was so confused. He had no certainty in his life any more, nothing solid to hold onto. Then, just before he went up to bed, Hermione tucked a piece of paper into his hand. He crumpled it in his fist, watching her go up the stairs to her dorm. When he was upstairs in his own bed, behind his bedcurtains, he finally looked at it by wandlight.

Common room. One o’clock. Invisibility Cloak.

Harry swallowed. She wanted to meet with him. It had been so long...but she didn’t want to

stop being with him. That was something. He felt a knot in his stomach undo itself, then found memories of their night together swirling through his head, and he tried to stop that too, before it overwhelmed him. It will be all right, he thought. But he wondered where they could go to be alone. If she wanted him to bring the cloak, it must be someplace outside of Gryffindor Tower. He checked his watch. One hour. It seemed like a very, very long hour. When it was almost one o'clock, he stepped out of bed carefully and removed his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk. He crept out of the dorm, then down the stairs, finding her waiting. She smiled beautifully at him. "I couldn't wait another minute either."

And then she was there again, in his arms, and their mouths were connected as though drawn by some supernatural force. He trembled as he held her face up to his, feeling nervous all over again, as though they hadn't already done this. She gently broke the kiss and pulled him over to the portrait hole. When they had gone through, they donned the cloak and she led him downstairs and through corridors to a familiar place; the girls' prefect bathroom.

"Drovers," she said to the shepherdess. The painting swung open and they entered. Candles flickered to life on the walls and ceiling, revealing a bathing space identical to the boys' prefect bathroom. Harry removed the cloak from them both and smiled at her.

"What a great idea..."

She smiled back. "I thought you'd think so." She went to the taps around the pool-sized tub and turned on a few. Some warm water gushed out, already impregnated with various shades of aromatic bubbles. As the tub filled, Hermione began to take off her dressing gown and night shirt. Harry froze; she was so beautiful, and he could see her so much better now, with the candles, instead of just the moon, like before.

She stepped delicately into the water, sighing as she did so, then looking up at Harry. "Come on then. I rather hoped you'd join me."

Harry suddenly felt like the most awkward person on the planet as he tripped over himself to get undressed. *I must have inherited my mother's grace*, he thought. Taking off Sandy, his glasses and lastly the basilisk amulet, he also slid down into the warm water, at the opposite end of the tub from Hermione, then swam over to her. She smiled at him as he put his arms around her; here was a brand new sensation, holding her underwater, with warm bubbles brushing up against them...

He leaned down to kiss her and she responded immediately. When he drew back, she looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"You know, you look *completely* different without your glasses, Harry?"

Harry frowned. "I can't tell if you mean that that's good or bad."

She smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. "Both are good. You just look like two different people with and without them."

He moved his hands down a little, making her moan. "Then are you cheating on your boyfriend when you're with Harry-in-glasses or Harry-without-glasses?"

"I don't know," she gasped, starting to kiss his neck and breathe more shallowly. "I'll let you know when I get my brain back..." He laughed and kissed her again. She pulled away from him and went to the edge of the tub, pulling herself up on the side to get out. Harry gasped; he thought the sight of her dripping wet was too fabulous for words...

She retrieved her wand from her dressing gown and put a spell he could not hear on the marble tile floor near the tub. He pulled himself out of the tub also and walked over to her.

"Hermione, what--"

But she suddenly pushed him and he fell, arms flailing, onto the tile floor where she'd just cast the spell. He winced, waiting for the pain from the hard tile coming in contact with his body, wondering simultaneously why she'd done that, but he landed instead on a soft, bouncy surface like a mattress. He pressed his fist against the tile floor next to where he was lying; it gave a little. He looked up at Hermione, who was smiling at him.

"Cushioning spell."

She joined him on the floor and he pulled her on top of him, kissing her deeply.

"My girlfriend is the cleverest witch on the planet," he said, smiling at her.

"And my boyfriend is the sexiest wizard on the planet," she said, kissing his neck, then moving her mouth further down while he threw back his head and remembered George in the bed at the cottage in Hogsmeade...

* * * * *

They had dozed off. Hermione's leg was thrown over his hip and he had been pillowing his head on his arm. He opened his eyes slowly, feeling a little disoriented. When he could place his location, he looked down at Hermione, peacefully sleeping. He reached out his hand and dipped it into the water in the tub; it had gone cold. He shivered. Then he had a mischievous thought. He dipped his hand in the cold water again, then flicked it at Hermione, the cold drops falling on her face.

She opened her eyes, crying out, sitting up, making Harry smile because he still couldn't get over how beautiful she was, and that he got to see all of her now.

"Harry--" she complained sleepily. He laughed.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist."

She looked at him appreciatively. "You're looking pretty irresistible yourself right about now..." she said softly, leaning in to kiss him. He responded at first, then pulled back.

"Hermione, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why didn't we just tell Ron when he saw the photo from Corfu?"

She scowled. "You really think that was the time? He was furious!"

"And he'll be even more furious when he eventually finds out that we were lying to him that day. What are we going to do, tell him in a year that we've started holding hands and gee, we'd never have thought of it if he hadn't asked if we were already seeing each other..."

"Don't get sarcastic with me, Harry. It's rather spoiling the mood."

"We need to *talk* about this, Hermione! He's our best friend; it's important."

"That just wasn't the *time*, Harry!"

Suddenly, there was a great splashing noise, and Harry realized that something had gushed out of the one of the tub taps and fallen into the cold bathwater. The silvery image surfaced, then rose up above the water, looking at them with great interest.

"Well!" Myrtle said in an offended tone. "I thought I heard your voice echoing down the pipes, Harry, but I never thought you'd be *here*, and with *her*..."

Harry looked at Moaning Myrtle in shock, then Hermione fully woke up and screamed. Both Harry and Myrtle covered their ears as the sound bounced around the hard marble in the bathroom.

"Hermione!" he said, annoyed. "You'll wake up half the school!"

She dashed over to where she'd thrown her dressing gown and pulled it on. Myrtle looked at Harry as appreciatively as Hermione had. "You look different. You were more of a--boy last

year.”

Harry felt himself flush, remembering her spying on him in the boys’ prefect bathroom when he was trying to work out the clue for the second Tournament task. He took his dressing gown from the floor where he’d thrown it and put it on with his back to her. Hermione was pointing her wand at Myrtle, looking angry enough to kill, if Myrtle weren’t already dead.

He turned around and spoke to Myrtle. “You shouldn’t be spying on people in bathrooms. Go back to your toilet.”

“You were the ones having such a loud row. I could hear it clear down in the kitchen sinks.”

“We were not having a row!” Harry said, realizing after a second that this was a lie. He and Hermione never fought; she and Ron did, but not the two of them. Had it been a row?

“It certainly sounded like a row to me...” Myrtle sighed. “Do you have any idea how boring it is to be dead?” She wafted closer to Hermione, ignoring the wand pointed at her. “You *were* making quite a racket, you know, even before the row. All that moaning and--”

“*Anima tua, anima mea!*” Hermione cried, finally losing it. Harry watched in shock as Myrtle froze in mid-air. He looked at Hermione.

“What are you going to do?”

She looked thoughtful. “Maybe--let’s see, who don’t we like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s Malfoy, and his goons, and Pansy Parkinson...”

“What about Roger Davies?”

She smiled. “Perfect.”

“Hermione; what are you going to do?”

“A little prank. Harmless.” She looked grimly at the frowzy ghost. “Myrtle!” she said imperiously. “You did not see anything here. You will go to the Ravenclaw seventh-year boys’ dorm and wake Roger Davies up with a big, wet, sloppy kiss!” She started to laugh, but managed to hold it in. Harry’s sides ached from not breaking out into laughter. She pointed her wand at Myrtle again.

“*Anima tua!*”

Myrtle woke up, didn’t spare the two of them a glance, and went flying back up one of the taps around the perimeter of the tub. In a blink, she was gone. Hermione drained the tub, then took off her dressing gown again, making Harry shudder from the sight of her, but it was only so that she could put her nightshirt and underwear back on. He knew he should do the same; they should return to their separate beds in Gryffindor Tower. It was getting late.

When they were dressed, they went to the door and put the Invisibility Cloak on again, opening the painting cautiously, in case Filch was nearby. They reached the portrait hole again without incident, but before they reentered the common room, Harry pulled her to him in a long, slow kiss. When he pulled his mouth away from hers, Hermione looked like she just might drag him back to the bathroom...

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“Thank you? That’s all you can say?”

“I mean--thank you for confirming that I didn’t dream that night we spent together. I was starting to wonder...”

“Oh, right. Well--what with Neville and all--”

“I know.”

“I mean, I wanted you so much all that time, and I felt so guilty for feeling that way when

Neville--”

“I know, I know,” he said, getting softer and softer, leaning down to kiss her again. It was a brief, delicate kiss. He swallowed. “We should go in,” he said, still whispering. She nodded, looking reluctant. He gave the password and the portrait swung open. She slipped out from under the cloak and went up the stairs without a backward look, and he returned to his dorm, walking on his toes, trying to resist the urge to sneeze (his nose was tickling) until he was back behind his bedcurtains. On the other side of the room he could hear Ron snoring.

Then Harry remembered that today was Ron’s sixteenth birthday. He thought of the present he had for him, wrapped and hiding in his trunk. He’d felt very smug for deciding to give this to Ron; he knew it was something that would just bowl him over. But now he wished he could give him another gift instead--the gift of truth. When would they be able to tell him? he wondered. He laid back against his pillows, falling asleep again, wishing they could just tell Ron everything...

* * * * *

Harry tried not to grin too much when he and Ron met Hermione for running the next morning. He had wished Ron a happy birthday when he woke him up, and asked him if he wanted the day off from running. Ron said he didn’t, so it started off like any other day. Classes were full of O.W.L. review, as was the usual lately, but after Moody’s class at the end of the day, they would get to go to a party down at Hagrid’s. Everyone knew that Ron knew (he hated surprises) and they were all set to walk out the front door of the castle and go down to Hagrid’s when Ron noticed that Ginny wasn’t with them.

“Oh,” Angelina said, “She had Potions last period. Must still be down there.”

“Tell you what,” Ron said to them all. “Harry and I will go and get her, and you all can get there first, and when I arrive I’ll *pretend* to be surprised.” He smiled merrily; it was his birthday, and he seemed happier than Harry had seen him in a while. Parvati reached up and kissed him quickly, then went off with the others, looking over her shoulder at him and smiling. Hermione walked near her, an inscrutable look on her face.

Harry and Ron turned and went down the steps to the dungeons; Ron was practically skipping. Harry had given Hermione his present for Ron to take down to Hagrid’s; he knew that once Ron saw its shape, he’d have a pretty good idea what it was.

But when they were in the dungeon corridor, they heard a horrible sound. A girl, it had to be a girl. She was trying to cry out, but something was preventing her. Ron had a dreadful look on his face, and quickly outpaced Harry with his long legs, racing toward the Potions classroom. Harry froze with shock upon entering the room; Malfoy and Ginny were there. Ginny’s wrists were lashed to the wall above her head with magical ropes, no visible attachments, while Malfoy had ripped her robes and her clothes; she still wore her bra and underpants and skirt, which had been pushed up around her waist. Her thighs seemed very thin and pale and freckled; Malfoy was sucking on her neck, his hands wandering over her while she struggled ineffectually, a cloth in her mouth preventing her from speaking or crying out more than they had heard.

Malfoy turned when he heard them enter; he had his wand out already, Harry realized. Ron pulled his out too and he immediately tried to disarm Malfoy, but he dodged it nimbly, while Ginny pulled at her bonds and struggled to speak against the gag. Ron threw his wand to the floor and lunged at Malfoy, who was not expecting this and fell backwards, his wand flying out of his hand, as Ron began to rain blows down upon his face with his fists. Harry ran to Ginny, breaking the spell that held her wrists to the wall. He helped her get the gag out, then picked up

her robes from the floor, wrapping them gently around her, covering her up again. She leaned on him, crying freely.

“Why did I ever trust him?” she sobbed into his shoulder. “What did I ever see in him...” he rubbed her back and they sat on the floor, leaning against a wall, while Malfoy tried to fight back against Ron now, getting in a few blows of his own. They were rolling around on the dungeon floor, banging into the tables, blood flowing from various wounds on each of their faces. Malfoy’s nose was positively gushing red.

Harry didn’t care at this point if they killed each other; Ginny was what was important. *Damn you, Malfoy. You couldn’t wait for her to want to?* He held her and rocked her; this would scar her for a long time, he knew. Girls didn’t just get over this sort of thing. He ached inside that she should ever experience something like this. That Ginny, of all people, should have to remember this...

She clung to him, her head on his chest, his robes wrapped around her, as well as his arms, protecting her. Then he realized that he was actually one of the people she needed to be protected from. This was partly his fault. He had trusted Malfoy too. He had let her down, he should never have let this go on, he should have told her brothers...

Malfoy and Ron were getting tired, landing rather half-hearted punches now. Harry wasn’t even sure where their wands were. Then he realized he heard footsteps in the corridor; a second later, Snape entered. The moment that he spotted Malfoy and Ron, he strode over to them, separating them and holding one of them with each hand. It wasn’t difficult for him to do; they were both exhausted from their fight, gasping for breath and covered in blood and bruises. Snape looked at Harry holding the sobbing Ginny. He felt he should explain what had happened.

“Malfoy was--attacking Ginny--” was all he could choke out, however, before he felt Ginny shivering uncontrollably in his arms, crying anew. Snape nodded.

“I can see what has happened. Take her to Madam Pomfrey. I will deal with these two.”

Harry helped Ginny to stand and they left the room. They heard Snape haul Ron and Malfoy out of the classroom and into the corridor, walking in the opposite direction from the stairs.

Suddenly, Ginny straightened up and called, “Professor Snape!” in a quavering voice.

He turned in surprise. “Yes?”

“My brother was--just trying to--to--”

Snape nodded. “I understand.”

He turned, his hands still firmly clenching Ron’s and Malfoy’s upper arms, and marched them down the corridor. Harry turned to Ginny, buttoning his robes around her more securely; suddenly she collapsed against him. He propped her under her arms.

“Ginny?” he whispered to her gently. “Do you want me to carry you?” She nodded slowly, and he scooped her up, while she put her arm around his shoulder and her head on his chest. He cradled her light frame against him, sorry when they reached the infirmary and he had no excuse to go on holding her. Madam Pomfrey tucked her into a bed and drew a curtain around her, eyeing Harry pointedly. He was being asked to leave.

With a heavy heart, he went down to Hagrid’s hut, to what should have been a merry sixteenth birthday party for Ron. Instead...

When Fred and George heard, they were livid. “Malfoy!” Fred said turning redder than his hair.

“He’s *dead!*”

“What about Ron?” Hermione wanted to know. Parvati looked anxious about this too.

“I don’t know. We should all go back up to the castle.” Hagrid looked sadly at the festive table in his garden, the birthday cake and the pile of presents for Ron.

“Poor little Ginny...” he sniffled, pulling out a large handkerchief, then growling fiercely. “I’d like a go at Malfoy meself...” Harry shivered; Malfoy wouldn’t stand a chance against Hagrid. *I’d like to see that*, Harry thought.

When they reached the entrance hall, McGonagall was coming up from the dungeons. All of them starting talking at her at once, wanting to know what was going to happen. Harry remembered that Dumbledore was still in London, at the trial, as was Moody. McGonagall was deputy headmistress, and acting headmistress in Dumbledore’s absence.

“Settle down, everyone, settle down!”

They all gradually quieted. She cleared her throat; her eyes looked red. Harry thought it was possible she had been crying. Ginny was an excellent student, and students like her were dear to McGonagall’s heart. Harry remembered her sniffing over Hermione when she’d been petrified by the basilisk.

“Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley will both be suspended for two weeks. They are in separate cells in the dungeons right now, waiting for their parents to come get them. After his two week suspension, Mr. Weasley will return to school. After *his* suspension, Mr. Malfoy will undergo a disciplinary review before the board of governors to determine whether he will continue the rest of his education at Hogwarts.”

Malfoy was going to be expelled! Harry thought happily. The disciplinary review sounded like a mere formality before kicking him out. Then his happiness fled. How were they going to get his dad if he was suspended? Percy was supposed to report on Saturday! Stupid Malfoy, why couldn’t keep his hands off Ginny? That’s if he ever intended to get his dad at all, which Harry was starting to doubt very much now...

Parvati was crying on Lavender’s shoulder; Lavender shushed her and led her up the marble stairs. Fred and George looked very much like they wanted to hit something--or someone. McGonagall decided to give them something constructive to do.

“Fred--can you wait here for your parents and bring them up to my office when they arrive? They’ve probably just Apparated into the village. It shouldn’t take them long to walk up here.”

“Yes ma’am.” Fred went to stand sentry near the door.

“George--help Alicia keep order upstairs in Gryffindor Tower. I don’t want to hear of any wild reactions to this. We all need to keep our wits about us.” George nodded, and he and Alicia led the rest of the Gryffindors up the stairs. McGonagall started to follow, but she noticed that Harry and Hermione were still standing in the hall, as though shell-shocked.

“Harry? Hermione? Are you coming?”

Hermione looked up at her with glistening eyes. “Professor? Today is Ron’s sixteenth birthday. He and Harry were just supposed to be getting Ginny to bring her to a party down in Hagrid’s garden. Could we--could we just go down to talk to him? Through the cell door?”

McGonagall looked at the two of them kindly. “Of course you may go talk to him. He’ll need his friends right now.”

She turned and continued going up the steps. Harry and Hermione went down to the dungeons. When they passed the open door to the potions classroom, Hermione looked in. She gasped when she saw Ginny’s ripped blouse that had been left behind. The tables were pushed out of alignment, and there was blood on the floor from either Malfoy or Ron or perhaps both of them. Then something caught Harry’s eye; he crossed the room, realizing as he drew nearer what it

was.

He stooped down and picked up Ron's wand. He looked around for Malfoy's. He couldn't find it.

"Harry? What are you doing with Ron's wand?"

"He left it here. But I saw Malfoy drop his wand too; only it's not here now."

Hermione looked around for another wand; it wasn't to be found. She looked up at Harry.

"We should go talk to him, let him know his parents are coming."

He nodded to her and they left the room. Harry tucked Ron's wand into his robes. They walked down the corridor in the direction Harry had seen Snape take Ron and Malfoy. They turned several corners, then saw a series of heavy wooden doors with barred windows in the upper portion, heavy ironwork on the exteriors of the doors. Harry looked in the first one, having to stand on his toes to see in. The cell was empty. He tried the next one; also empty. Hermione was too short to see in the barred windows at all. After they'd been peeking into cells for fifteen minutes, she huffed impatiently.

"Ron!" she finally called. "It's Harry and Hermione! Where are you?"

There was no answer. But Harry noticed that the light further down the corridor looked odd, as though two of the cell doors were open and torchlight from inside the cells was shining into the passageway. He raced in the direction of the strange light, Hermione keeping pace with him. The two open, empty cells were identical, except that in one of them there was a piece of parchment in the middle of the floor. Harry picked it up.

"*For the eyes of Harry Potter,*" the first line read. He looked up at Hermione.

"Why are you messing around with a blank piece of parchment?" she said impatiently, looking around the cell. He swallowed.

"It's not blank. It's just been charmed so only I can read it."

She was at his side instantly. "What's it say?"

He read the rest of it aloud. "*Bring Granger and come to the forest. Do not tell anyone where you are going. Do not come alone, either one of you. Weasley will die if you do not follow these instructions.*"

She looked at him anxiously. "That's it? That's all it says?"

He nodded. Then he looked at her, knowing she would object--

"Listen, Hermione, I know you hated it last time..."

"I have to ride on you again, don't I?" she said shakily.

He nodded. "It will be the fastest way to find him, to look from the air."

She looked resigned. "Let's go then," she said, almost too softly for him to hear.

They walked up the stairs to the entrance hall holding hands, no longer caring who might see them. When they reached the front doors, Fred was no longer there; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley must be meeting with Professor McGonagall already. They went outside, ducking into the topiaries at the side of the door.

"Ready?" Harry asked her. She nodded; he could see, however, that she was shaking from head to foot. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the transfiguration, trying not to be distracted by worrying about her, or Ron, or Ginny. He focused wholly on himself, on becoming the golden griffin...His paws landed softly on the ground. He spread his wings and looked up at her. He felt her swing her leg over his back and lean over him, her fingers laced tightly into his mane, her knees and thighs gripping him painfully.

The sun was low, turning the western sky orange and apricot. He took a few running steps and

then leapt into the air, building height as he moved the strong gossamer wings, flying straight toward the Forbidden Forest.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Eight The Choice

Harry moved his wings slowly, forward and back, feeling a warm breeze on his face. Hermione clung to his back, her face buried in his mane; he could feel her ribcage moving against him with every labored breath she took. She must be terrified, he thought. He wished he could talk to her, but in his Animagus form he didn't have a human voice box.

He looked down; the trees were below them now. Harry scanned the forest, looking for clearings. He often had to make several passes over an opening in the trees to determine whether there was anything to see; the clearings were small, he was well over a hundred feet in the air, and he flew over them quickly. He couldn't hover, like a hummingbird. They saw the giants' camp at one point, and he hoped they didn't see him. He wondered whether Malfoy had run into the giants.

Then a strange feeling thrilled through him. He felt it from the tips of his nose and ears to the end of his tail, to his very toes. An animal instinct, making his hide twitch; he felt like he was sensing Ron's presence. *We're close*, he thought.

Hermione spotted them first. She dared to take one hand off his mane and point. "There! I saw a fire--and Malfoy's hair. It's impossible to miss!"

Harry would have felt a lot better if she'd seen Ron's hair--that was pretty hard to miss, too. Then she frantically clutched at his mane again, making him wince. He was banking, heading for a clearing that was about one-hundred yards from where she'd seen the fire. Hopefully Malfoy hadn't seen them in the sky. He probably wouldn't think to look up, Harry thought. Unless he expected them to come on broomstick...

Harry tried not to think of what would happen if Malfoy saw him in his griffin form. He descended in tight spirals, as she pulled painfully on his mane even more. They were on the ground at last. There was a greenish cast to the late-afternoon light in the forest, as if they were underwater. Harry changed back to his human form, groaning with the pain, both in his bones and his scalp.

"Ouch, Hermione! You can stop pulling my hair now."

"Sorry," she mumbled, rolling off his back, the absence of her warm weight making him feel a little cold. It was less embarrassing this time for her to be flying with him; they'd been far more intimate physically since that first time in the air.

Harry willed himself to stand and disregard the pain in his joints. He helped her to stand and pointed through the trees at the fire; it was a large one, visible even at a distance. I hope they aren't going to burn the forest down, he thought. Then he jumped when he heard Sandy hissing under his robes.

"Harry Potter," Sandy said softly. "What has happened?"

"Oh no!" Harry said, hitting his head, feeling like a complete prat. "I forgot! I was wearing Sandy when I changed!" He pulled her out of his sleeve. "Sandy! Are you all right? I'm so sorry--"

"For what are you sorry?"

"For changing into a golden griffin and not putting you somewhere safe--"

“You can change into a golden griffin?”

“It’s my Animagus form. That’s why I wasn’t wearing you to dinner for a while, because every night after dinner...”

“Interesting. I was part of a golden griffin.”

“What?”

“When you changed, I changed with you. I do not remember anything that occurred during that time. Where are we now?”

“In the Forbidden Forest. So you’re okay?”

“Evidently. I am not saying that I would choose to be a part of a golden griffin every day, as I do not like them. You did not kill any snakes I hope?”

“No. I just did it so I could fly over the forest.”

Hermione tapped him on the shoulder. “As interesting as it is to stand here listening to you hissing, we have to find Ron!”

“Right. Just a second.” He looked at Sandy again. “Sandy, can you See anything? Anything at all?”

“I cannot receive the Sight at will, Harry Potter. It is a gift.”

“Well if you have any gifts to give me while we’re here in the forest, please let me know right away. I know I sometimes tell you not to tell me things, to stay quiet, but right now I need all the help I can get.”

“I will not keep quiet,” she promised him. Harry let her slither back under his sleeve; he felt her wind around his arm again. He nodded at Hermione and reached for her hand; she gave it to him at first, then changed her mind and took her wand out. He nodded again and took out his own--no, that didn’t look right. He had grabbed Ron’s, which he put back in his pocket. He found his own wand and took it out. They approached the clearing as quietly as they could. Finally, they reached the perimeter of the irregular break in the trees. They could feel the heat now from the enormous orange-blue fire in the center. Malfoy was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was sure this was the same clearing they’d seen from the air. Where is he? Harry wondered. The clearing seemed deserted.

Suddenly, Hermione cried, “Ron!” She ran toward him. Thick vines bound him to a tree to the left of the thick tree trunk where they’d been crouching, which had blocked their view of him. Ron didn’t respond when she threw her arms around him. Harry looked around the clearing again, peering closely at the trees around him. He could see no one else. Hermione pulled away from Ron. Harry walked up to him and put his hands on either side of his head. His skin was still warm and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Stunned,” Harry said simply. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She leaned on the tree next to Ron’s catching her breath. Suddenly, what looked like very strong vines around the base of the tree reached out and pulled her to the trunk. She screamed, but more vines wound themselves around her, trapping her arms at her sides. Even though it only took Harry a moment to reach her, he couldn’t pry the thick vines from her, as strong as steel cables.

Then he felt something on his foot. He looked down and saw a vine wrap itself around his ankle and pull him to a tree beside Hermione’s. Before he could do anything, more vines whipped around his body, binding him to the tree, as had happened to her. He looked helplessly at her and the still-senseless Ron. He had dropped his wand; it lay on the ground not a foot in front of him. Hermione had also dropped her wand.

Harry looked toward the crackling flames, which did not seem to rely on any sort of fuel to

burn. Then he thought he saw a face floating above the flames; no, it wasn't floating. It was a person approaching from the other side of the clearing. A face he'd last seen on the day of the ceilidh, staring back at him from the edge of the village moments before he Apparated.

Lucius Malfoy.

The look in his eyes chilled Harry to the bone. He smiled, the most insincere smile Harry had ever seen in his life. Harry was startled by how much he seemed to be just an older version of his son; he hadn't thought the Lucius Malfoy in the Pensieve looked exactly like Draco Malfoy. But now he felt as if he could see a quarter-century into the future, see an older Draco Malfoy. *Which will never happen*, Harry thought, *if I just kill him, which I might very well...*

He saw Ginny in his mind's eye again, shivering and wide-eyed, her huddled form against his chest like a small child as he carried her to the hospital wing. He clenched his jaw. Malfoy would pay for what he'd done to Ginny--*both* Malfoys, he remembered, since Lucius Malfoy had been the one to give Ginny Tom Riddle's diary. He felt hate for all things Malfoy roiling through him, as he watched the grim-faced wizard who'd recruited Snape to be a Death Eater walk around the magical fire toward him.

Draco Malfoy followed his father. Another figure was behind him; he was slight, bowed just a little, wearing a hood which threw his features into shadow. He walked toward Harry, Ron and Hermione around the opposite side of the fire from the two Malfoys, and when he raised his hands to push his hood back, that's when Harry saw it; Hermione had noticed too, and she gasped.

The silver hand.

Wormtail's ghoulish little face peered at Harry, Ron and Hermione, and something that might have been a smile spread over his visage. He and Lucius and Draco Malfoy approached them. Harry and Ron were on each end, Hermione in the middle. Harry stared with revulsion at Wormtail. Suddenly, his parents' erstwhile Secret-Keeper raised his wand and pointed it at Ron.

"Enervate!"

Ron shook his head and struggled to open his eyes. He looked down, surprised to see himself bound to a tree. He looked surprised in general, staring first at Wormtail, then the Malfoys, then Harry and Hermione.

"W-what--?" he stammered.

"I'll talk," Harry informed the two of them, taking charge. "Where is he, Wormtail?"

His eyes bore into Harry's. "Where is who?" came his oddly high-pitched voice.

"Voldemort."

"My Master. And soon--your Master as well."

"Where is he?" Harry was shaking.

"He is not coming today. Tomorrow, we will take you to him."

"Why?"

"Several reasons. You know that while he has his body back, he is not as strong as he was when the curse that rebounded from you left him less than a spirit. He is busy...busy building up his strength again. He does not wish to exert himself unduly. He is relying upon his servants to be strong for him until he is back to--his old self."

"No, I mean why am I being recruited? Voldemort's been trying to kill me for years. Why does he want me to be on his side now?"

Wormtail smiled. "On his side? You say that, Harry, as though being 'on his side' is the same as

being his comrade, an equal. You will not be 'on his side,' you will be his servant. There is a difference."

"You still haven't said why."

He nodded at Draco Malfoy. "Young Malfoy tells us you know about the Prophecy. You know why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby, and since then. 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' Surely you have heard that. You know that your parents decided they would rather die than see you serve my Master. It was I who convinced him to give James and Lily that choice. They did not need to die. All they had to do was let him put a spell on you as a baby, an invisible kind of Dark Mark, if you will, and you would have been his faithful servant. You would have had so many advantages! Young Malfoy here--he had some of those advantages, briefly, before the Dark Lord tried to kill you, and almost died himself. I asked him not to kill James and Lily, I did Harry. I would not lie about that. But they would not agree to raise you to be his servant, and without that promise, my Master's spell would have been useless, just as useless as if you were orphaned. Once he killed both of your short-sighted parents..."

"Hey!" Harry responded indignantly.

"He decided to kill you, to make a clean sweep of it. Unfortunately, he did not anticipate Lily's sacrifice protecting you. And so you lived. Yet you did receive some protection from my Master, in a way, something of the protection you would have enjoyed had your parents simply let him claim you as his in the first place. You have enjoyed some of the abilities my Master has, have you not? I understand you are a Parselmouth, like my Master. Do you ever offer any thanks to him for this ability? You should. Or, when you see him, you can thank him in person."

"Thank him? For trying to kill me? And suppose--just suppose I agree to do this, to keep some people safe..." he looked sideways at Ron and Hermione.

"No, Harry!" she cried.

"Harry, don't!" Ron implored.

"This is my choice!" Harry growled back, his heart going a mile a minute.

"You know what we told you, Harry..." Hermione reminded him.

"We meant it," Ron said; Harry did indeed remember. They said they would die before letting him become a Death Eater.

"But that wouldn't be the end, even if the worst happened, would it?" he said to them. "There are always other people that could be hurt. How many people are supposed to suffer before it stops? Remember the Westminster tube station? He did that just to get my attention. Remember POTTER on the wall?"

Lucius Malfoy smiled. "Well, getting your attention was one reason for what the Dark Lord did in that station..."

"What was the other?"

The elder Malfoy smiled coyly. "You don't know the significance of that station?"

"Just that it's near Parliament."

He continued to smile. "Well. You are an ignorant little whelp, aren't you? But then, those Muggles wouldn't have been able to teach you anything, would they? Although it seems that the other two don't know either. Interesting. I don't know what this school is coming to. And you Weasley, son of a Ministry employee..."

"What are you talking about?" Harry wanted to know.

"Not now. There will be time..."

Harry glared at him. What was significant about that *particular* station? Other than the connection to Muggle government? “And the Three Broomsticks. Were you behind that?” “Technically, although of course, I was down the road at the ceilidh, where dozens of people could vouch for me...”

“Do you think that your becoming a Death Eater will put a stop to all that?” Hermione demanded of Harry. “What do you think *you* would be required to do as a Death Eater?” Lucius Malfoy stepped toward them, cold steel-colored eyes lighting on each of them in turn. “Yes, young Potter. What do you think I should ask you to do? Hmmm...Torturing your friends comes to mind...”

“No!” Harry cried. “Let them go. I’m who you want. Leave them out of it. All right. I accept. Make me a Death Eater, I don’t care. But let them go.” He felt tears behind his eyelids. Now Draco Malfoy came swimming toward him, looking blurry.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet?” he said in a sing-song intonation. “Except that it’s not true that you’re the only one wanted here. I’ve been telling my dad that Granger and Weasley would make fine candidates as well. She has the brains, and he has the temper. I can testify to that,” he said with a lopsided grin, pressing his hand momentarily against a bruise on his cheekbone. His open wounds had been magically healed between the time Snape hauled him out of the Potions classroom and this moment, but it was easy to tell he’d been fighting recently.

“I can’t believe I actually was starting to think you were an all-right bloke...Helping me when the pub blew up, sitting with Neville...” Ron’s wounds were caked in dried blood, a bruise on his cheekbone below his left eye; he might have had other bruises, but the facial hair he’d grown to hide the scar on his cheek now also hid those marks.

Draco Malfoy smiled. “Thank you, thank you,” he said, bowing. “I should go on the stage, I should. Take the West End by storm.”

Hermione muttered darkly, “If you ever appear in the West End, people will no longer be engaged in hyperbole when they say the theatre is dead.”

He stepped forward, stood very close to her. “Now you’re just trying to hurt my feelings,” he whispered, his face very close to hers. She turned her head and closed her eyes.

“What feelings?” Ron snarled. “Look at what you did to my sister!”

Draco Malfoy laughed, stepping back from Hermione and looking at his father and Wormtail, who smiled smugly. “What I did to your sister! You haven’t figure it out yet, you great ponce?” Ron looked murderously at him. “Figured what out?” he said between his teeth.

“That I didn’t do a damn thing to your sister. That whole scene was an act. She’s almost as good as I am. If I were going to shag your sister--especially against her will--do you think I’d use the Potions dungeon? I’m not an exhibitionist, Weasley. Not that there haven’t been people who tried to change my mind about that.” He smiled, enjoying himself. “We weren’t sure who our audience would be, but we were pretty safe in betting that one or more of the Weasley brothers, once they got wind of it, would be trying to bash my skull in. Luckily, I took a lot of painkilling potion beforehand. You were getting very annoying, you know. Actually landed one or two punches.”

Ron was looking like he was sulking a bit. “A lot more than that, I thought.”

“Okay, three or four. I’d suggest that you all put your hands together and clap for the fabulous acting talents of Miss Virginia Weasley, but she’s not here--she’s continuing her performance in the infirmary, I assume--and you three aren’t exactly in a position to clap.”

“What makes you think I believe you?”

“Would you like me to detail every move of my seduction of your sister? Or better still--her seduction of me? She’s got a very dirty mind, you know. All the smartest girls do. But then, you know that, don’t you Potter?” Although he spoke to Harry, he looked at Hermione again. Harry saw her close her eyes, shivering, so she wouldn’t have to meet that knowing gaze. “That part of our relationship is actually relatively new. I was almost proper about the whole thing, waiting until after she turned fifteen. I just hope the Dark Lord doesn’t think that makes me soft, that it disqualifies me from being a Death Eater.” He smiled at his father, who chuckled appreciatively. Wormtail looked uncomfortable. “Potter saw us behind Hagrid’s cabin on her birthday. You didn’t know I’d figured that out, did you Potter? You have to watch what you say in future. You can be careless. Ginny wasn’t ready that day. Close, but not quite.”

Ron glared at Harry. “You *knew* about *them* ?”

Draco Malfoy slowly, laconically walked over to stand before Ron. “Not only that, Weasley,” he drawled. “He knew about it quite a while ago.” He turned to look at Harry and Hermione. “When was it, October? You know, that night the two of you were going at it in your common room and I came by to take Ginny for a little midnight walk around the castle...”

“*October!*” Ron’s voice had gone up an octave. “*Common room?*” His face was turning as red as his hair.

“It wasn’t like that!” Hermione burst out desperately. “We had just used Hedwig to deliver a letter to Dudley. Ginny came downstairs and Harry figured out that she was going to meet Malfoy--”

“Hermione!” Harry said suddenly. “Shut up!” She looked at him with a hurt expression, hearing the hardness in his voice. He was tired of the lies.

But Ron looked at Malfoy through narrowed eyes, nodding his head. “Oh, I see what you’re doing again, Malfoy. I told you before, Harry and Hermione are friends. You can stop the--”

“Friends?” Malfoy laughed. “If most friends regularly shag each other senseless.”

“Stop it!” Ron shouted. “Stop saying that!”

“Can’t stand the truth, can you Weasley?” He moved from Ron to Hermione, standing very close to her. She turned her head, closing her eyes, her cheeks flushed, a tear running down one cheek.

Although he was looking closely at her, he was addressing Harry. “What’s she like, Potter? Eh? What kind of sounds does she make? I’m betting on a screamer...”

“Malfoy--” Ron was saying again, getting darker red with every second. Suddenly Hermione turned her head and spat at Malfoy. He stepped back, wiping his cheek with his hand, livid. He reached for his wand, but Wormtail stepped forward, putting his hand on his arm.

“There is a way to determine this,” he said with a soft lisp, and then suddenly, he was Scabbers again, but Scabbers with a strange little silver paw. He climbed up Hermione’s robes, then theropy vines binding her. He poked his nose here and there, while Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and looked green. He climbed higher and higher, closer to her face. She lifted her chin when he sniffed her neck; she was shivering and shaking, more tears sliding out of her eyes. Without warning, the rat ran down her body and went to Harry, repeating the performance. Harry felt goosepimples all over as he felt the rat’s progress; he felt sour stomach bile in the back of his throat as the rodent came closer and closer to his face. He squeezed his eyes shut as Hermione had done, trying to blank his mind until it was over.

Finally, the rat jumped back down to the ground, and in a blink, Wormtail had reappeared in his human form. He smiled lasciviously at Draco and Lucius Malfoy.

“They’ve been together in the last twenty-four hours. Probably more like fifteen hours. His smell is all over her, hers is all over him...there’s some soap, too. They’ve tried to wash each other’s scents away, but it’s too soon, it’s still too strong. And it’s not just that their scents are on each other; there’s another scent too. Unmistakable. Certain--bodily fluids--”

A slow smile spread across Draco Malfoy’s face. “I am the luckiest bugger there is. I just want all of you to know that.” He looked at Ron, who was glaring at Harry and Hermione, still speechless. Hermione looked at her feet; Harry glared at Draco Malfoy. “I certainly suspected, especially after that photo turned up...but now we know, don’t we? Beyond a shadow of a doubt. I don’t hear anyone denying it now.” He turned to his father, waving his arm at the three bound to the trees as though he were a salesman showing off his wares. “Have I done it or haven’t I, father? Now, I know I said I would bring you Harry Potter and his two best friends, but this is even better. Harry Potter, his best friend and--his girlfriend.”

His father stepped forward and stood very close to Hermione, looking down at her in a way Harry did not like. “So,” he said in a soft, silky voice. “It worked.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. When she flinched away from his touch, he smacked her, the red imprint of his hand showing clearly on her pale cheek. Harry had hoped for a moment that she might spit at him too, but she didn’t look like she would dare.

“Leave her alone!” Ron growled at him, straining again at the vines. Lucius Malfoy ignored him, continuing to bore his eyes into Hermione, his hand on her cheek again. She would not meet his gaze. His son laughed at Ron.

“Still defending her after the way she lied to you, Weasley? After the way she went after Potter? The way she forced you to settle for Patil? Not that Patil doesn’t look very nice and--flexible. But when she’s not your first choice...”

“Leave Parvati out of this!” Ron snarled.

“You said it worked,” Harry said suddenly to Lucius Malfoy. His voice shook. “What worked?”

The older man didn’t turn away from Hermione. “I planned ahead. I thought, Would a teenage boy do everything in his power to protect his friends? Considering that the boy in question was Harry Potter, the answer was--probably. Then I asked myself, What about a *girlfriend*? And the answer I gave myself changed to *definitely*. My next problem was--how to make sure Harry Potter would have a girlfriend. I came up with several prospects.”

Sirius had said the very same thing, Harry remembered. *A teenage boy--how better to get at him than going through a teenage girl?* He turned to look at Hermione; she turned her head and met his gaze, an anguished look in her eyes. A spell, he thought, his mind reeling. *It was all a spell!*

His throat was tight as he choked out the question: “Who?”

“We began first with a couple of girls in your own house, girls you would also see during Quidditch practice. It was easy enough to find Miss Bell, since she was staying with her great-aunt in Hogsmeade during the summer, and it was also fairly simple with the Head Girl, since her parents are Muggles. Draco didn’t know about this. That’s one reason I was somewhat surprised to see her with my son at the ceilidh. I behaved as if I did not know about her parents. It would have been suspect for me to know too much about her. I would have thought that she would have been your choice if you were going on looks alone,” he said snidely to Harry, lifting up a lock of Hermione’s hair as if judging her and finding her wanting. “Didn’t she pursue you at all, Potter?”

“Yes,” Harry whispered, remembering his moment of weakness, when Alicia kissed him and he kissed back.

“And Bell?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Not as much,” he said quietly. “I think--she fancied another boy.” He remembered Lee Jordan being rather alarmed by Katie having mononucleosis. “Was that all?”

Draco Malfoy laughed derisively. “Believe it or not, my dad did not bewitch every girl in school. You’d think he had. There’s no accounting for taste. You could have saved yourself some trouble, father. Practically every idiotic girl in the castle was throwing herself at Potter. Why, I have no idea...”

His father ignored his son and Harry both. “And then, of course, the one we thought would work best--the Ravenclaw Seeker. And it seemed to be successful for a while--although just to be certain, I strengthened the Imperius Curse on her when I came for that Quidditch Match--but then my son,” now he turned and sneered at Draco, “managed to make a colossal blunder.” Harry furrowed his brow. “What?”

Draco grimaced. “The Charms classroom. I didn’t check the book where I found that spell closely enough. Didn’t see the part about the forty days of enchanted sleep.”

“But--but--” Harry sputtered, “you knew that Cho Chang and I had broken up.”

“Exactly. Which meant that you didn’t suspect me. What I was trying to do there, in case you couldn’t tell, was get you suspended or worse, expelled. Once you had left the school and were en route to your Muggle family, you would be vulnerable. Of course, Dumbledore never seriously suspected you, or he believed whatever story you told in your defense.”

“But you said--school owls...”

“Oh, right. The school owls. Made it up. I also made you suspect Davies. Which made me think of recommending him to my father for recruitment. He *will* probably make an excellent Death Eater. You are too gullible by far, Potter. Just more of my amazing acting prowess,” he smirked, walking lazily over to Harry. “If you had eyes in your head, if you were at all observant, you’d have known that I never got any school owls.”

“So,” Harry said shakily, turning to Malfoy’s father, trying to sort out everything that had occurred. “You put the three of them under Imperius. And it didn’t really work that well. What did you do to Hermione?”

Malfoy’s dad frowned. “She was harder to get at, in Bulgaria. But an opportunity finally arose, in the market. Luckily, we already knew that Krum was hopelessly puppet-like under Imperius. His assistance was invaluable. You, however,” he said bringing his face close to Hermione’s again, “you fought the curse from the moment it was put on you. So we had to use more drastic measures.”

Hermione raised her eyes to his at last; she could finally find out what had happened to her when she was kidnapped. “What?” she whispered.

“A potion. Rather like a liquid form of Imperius. But longer lasting, harder to resist. Obviously, since it seems to have gotten you and Potter together...”

“How long does it last?” she asked, her lip trembling.

“Six months. Which seems to have given the two of you ample time to become...intimate.”

Hermione didn’t look scared any more. She looked more like she was working out an Arithmancy problem. “But--that means it wore off in early February!” she said, with a note of triumph in her voice.

Draco Malfoy raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "So? You and Potter were already--" "But we weren't!" she said, sounding almost happy, a smile starting to pull at the corners of her mouth. She looked at Harry. "Don't you remember? When I told you I wasn't feeling--insane any more? The potion had worn off by then. I was resisting it all that time!"

Lucius Malfoy frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

Hermione was practically babbling. "I mean, we--we kissed, but not--" she started to say something else, but caught Ron's eye and looked down, suddenly silent and flushed. The flames from the fire made her look even redder.

Draco Malfoy walked over to Harry, an incredulous expression on his face. "You mean you two were all alone in Gryffindor Tower during the Christmas holidays and didn't do it? You expect us to believe that?"

"It's true," Harry said, his jaw clenched.

"So we're to believe that your first time was last night?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. He too caught Ron's eye, but then Ron looked away. "Not exactly," he said softly. "Easter hols. Middle of the week. Just before I found Neville."

Ron had dropped his jaw, then closed it again. Harry saw him swallow. He tried to will himself to look back at Ron, to not chicken out and drop his gaze. He tried to communicate as much apology as he could through his eyes, but Ron's eyes were blazing, the fire reflected in them heightening the effect.

Malfoy came and stood next to his dad, also leering at Hermione now. "So. You've been going at it like bunnies since then, have you?"

Hermione looked back at him defiantly. "No, you pervert! Last night was only--only the second time--" she trailed off.

Malfoy threw up his hands and went to stand closer to Ron. "Only the second time, she says. But what timing! On the eve of your best friend's birthday, the best friend who you were still lying to about shagging Potter. How completely tactless, Granger. Don't dentists teach their children manners?"

His father laughed along with him. Harry thought of New Year's eve, on Ron's bed. That was pretty tactless too. And she was still under the influence of the potion then. He had stopped them from finishing what they'd started. He was stopping himself even before Sandy told him about Sirius coming. He remembered Hermione saying in the Charms classroom, *I want this too much*. She was fighting, all that time, fighting what she wanted and what the potion made her want, which were so close together that it was confusing. She knew she didn't feel quite right, but she didn't know why.

"Harry," she said softly, turning her head to him. "You know I'm not under a spell, or the influence of potion, right? You know that?" Her eyes pleaded with him. He nodded, but he couldn't help thinking, *But for so long, you were. What do we make of that?*

Ron seemed determined to ignore them. "What about my sister?" he demanded angrily. "What did you do to make my sister go with you? What have you done to her?"

Malfoy strode over to Ron and gave him a lopsided smile. "Merely the Draco Malfoy charm. When I really want to turn it on, it can be quite irresistible. Although, truth to tell, she was the one turning on the charm at first. Very subtle, but I could tell. She was all put out about Potter being with Chang. Then I thought, what if I could get her to join us..."

His father finally moved away from Hermione now, going to stand beside his son, watching Ron's face. "Arthur Weasley's daughter," he drawled, smiling. "Wouldn't that be quite a coup!"

And now, it seems, Weasley will have to see two of his sons and his only daughter becoming Death Eaters. That pencil pusher at the ministry should be easy enough. Maybe the whole lot, if we can convince them. Those twin brothers of yours certainly could get some kicks from playing with Muggles, and seem to be quite creative. Then there's the charm-breaker, good skill for a servant of the Dark Lord. Ditto for the dragon man. Maybe we won't need to kill your dad after all. Once he learns his entire family has turned against him, perhaps he'll just oblige us with a nice, neat little heart attack."

"Percy? Percy is going to be a Death Eater?" Ron said, eyes practically bulging out of his head. "He hasn't given his answer yet, but if he values the lives of his loved ones, I think he will."

Wormtail stepped forward now, silent after so long. "So, are they all candidates? Planning to make up for bungling Clearwater and Flint, Malfoy?" he addressed the older man. Lucius Malfoy made a face. He turned to Wormtail.

"Er, thank you for not telling the Dark Lord about the other Weasley boy and this one and Granger. In future, I think I will present my recruits to him as a *fait accompli*..."

Wormtail smiled evilly. "Yes. You didn't look like you enjoyed your--punishment for botching those jobs. You're welcome." He turned to Harry now. "Of course, the other reason for my wanting to help you, Harry, is the fact that you saved my life, that night in the Shrieking Shack. I tried to keep my Master from using your blood to regain his body, but those entreaties were to no avail. Luckily for you, you escaped that night, so I can still repay you for what you did for me. I can take you under my wing, teach you the glories of serving the Dark Lord..."

Harry struggled against the vines again. "Then do it. Take me. Let them go."

Lucius Malfoy shook his head, amused. "But you three make such a wonderful team. We can't be breaking that up, can we? Although Weasley looks like he'd just as soon kill the two of you right now as look at you."

Harry turned to his head to look at Ron, whose gaze was shifting back and forth between him and Hermione, the most terrible expression Harry had ever seen there.

"I know!" Draco Malfoy said suddenly, almost like an excited small child. He started to laugh. "It's almost too perfect!" He stepped close to Ron and spoke softly near his ear; Ron flinched and tried to pull away, but the vines made it impossible. As Malfoy spoke, Ron's eyes widened. He turned and stared at the pale-haired boy. "So?" Malfoy said in a normal voice. "Do you agree to do it?" Ron looked dazed as he nodded--a very small nod, but it was there. Malfoy turned to his dad. "Father--let's untie Weasley. The Dark Mark will have to wait until he is presented, of course. But for his first act as a Death Eater, to prove his loyalty...do you think the Dark Lord would be terribly disappointed if Harry Potter were killed? By his best friend? Or would he rather that best friend kill Harry Potter's girlfriend?"

Lucius Malfoy furrowed his brow, but looked interested. "What did you have in mind, Draco?" He looked at Ron, smiling. "Let's give Weasley a choice. Right now, he certainly seems angry enough to do Cruciatus justice. Let him choose. He will put the curse on either Potter or Granger. Then, whoever he doesn't curse with Cruciatus would get the killing curse. That way, of course, the one who's going to die gets to see the other in agony, and they also get to consider their own impending death during the other's suffering." He grinned at Ron. "If he does this--there'll be no turning back for him. Think of Arthur Weasley's face when he finds out...Plus," he added, as though he'd just thought of it. "No matter whether you torture or kill Granger," he said to Ron, "you can still have your way with her, if you like. Although I call second. After all, what's a little necrophilia between friends?" At that, Harry saw Hermione turn

green again, as when Wormtail had been climbing on her. She made a gagging sound in her throat, and suddenly, she was wrenching, bringing up what was left of her lunch. It splattered on her shoes and splashed onto the leaves scattered on the ground before her.

Malfoy turned to her, grimacing. "Oh, that's attractive, Granger. Trying to put us off? You'll have to try harder. So I just won't shag your mouth, as appealing as that sounds..."

"As appealing as getting your prick bitten off?" she whispered malevolently, trying to swallow. "Point well taken," he said cheerfully. "If she's still alive, avoid the Mudblood's mouth. There is of course, an ample array of other orifices..."

Hermione was still shaking from the wrenching; Harry felt his stomach churning within him too, and he swallowed to avoid doing the same thing she did. He felt almost blinded by anger, hearing Malfoy speak this way about her, so cruel and yet so off-handed. Why can't I just do spontaneous magic at a moment like this? he wondered. But what he really wanted had very little to do with magic; he understood now why Ron had thrown down his wand in the Potions classroom and started throwing punches; Harry wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around Malfoy's neck and squeeze.

Lucius Malfoy laughed and smiled at his son and put his hand on his shoulder. "I like it. All right! Untie him, Wormtail!"

Pettigrew looked nervous about this. Harry remembered him reacting the same way when Malfoy said Karkaroff would need to be untied, before he put the *Hara Kiri* on him. The uncertainty never vanished from his face, but he drew his wand from his robes and flicked it carelessly in Ron's direction, saying "*Finite Incantatem*," and the vines released Ron. He stepped away from the tree just a little, flexing his arms and legs, shaking out his robes, drawing deep breaths; Harry realized for the first time that the tightness of the bindings were keeping him from being able to really fill his lungs satisfactorily. Wormtail kept his wand carefully trained on Ron.

"Get out your wand," Malfoy said to him. Ron patted down his robes. "I haven't got it. Must be back in the Potions classroom." His voice shook. He wouldn't meet Harry's or Hermione's eyes.

"Don't, Ron! Don't let them make you!" Hermione said. Ron scowled at her.

"Still think I care anything at all about you?" he spat, a look of utter hatred on his face. "You're so proud of the fact that you slept with Harry of your own accord. Like *that's* something to be proud of! And the way you lied about the photograph..."

"Well," she said weakly, "there was a grain of truth to it. There really were two photographs stuck together, that's what made me think of it. Except that they were copies of the same one, the one I sent Harry. It just didn't--didn't seem like the right time to tell you..."

He stepped toward her. "When would have been the right time? When?" his voice rose in volume, making her draw back, biting her lip, eyes glistening.

She put her chin up, suddenly defiant. "Maybe we should have told you right after you were done shagging Parvati! Which you only did because you were hacked off about what those Ravenclaws said about you..."

There was a loud *smack!* and Harry looked in shock at the two of them. Ron had *struck* her, harder than Lucius Malfoy by the look of the red mark on her cheek. Her mouth was open in shock.

"Parvati is my girlfriend, and everyone knows it! *We* weren't sneaking around. *And* you were keeping from me that my sister was with *Malfoy!*"

Malfoy made a face. "You say that like it's a bad thing..."

Hermione bit her lip, no longer defiant. "I'm so sorry, Ron..." she choked, even as her face still bore the mark of his hand.

He looked at her grimly, speaking softly. "Yes. You will be."

Harry swallowed. "This isn't you, Ron. You're not a murderer, you're not someone who can torture..."

He came to stand before Harry now. "I'm not, am I? And you are? I'd make a hell of a better Death Eater than you. I have ambition--" he turned to Hermione momentarily "--whether you think so or not--" he turned back to Harry. "And I would have killed Wormtail that night in the Shrieking Shack, or let Lupin and Sirius Black do it, anyway. You haven't got the guts to do this, Harry. I have. I'm tired of being in your shadow. I'm tired of being poor. What good has it ever done my family to embrace poverty? We won't be poor anymore. Or powerless. That's all going to change."

Malfoy stooped and picked up Harry's wand where it had fallen on the ground when the vines had pulled him to the tree. "Is this your wand, Potter?" Harry wouldn't answer, but Ron recognized it.

"Yeah, that's his." Harry kept silent, looking back and forth between the two of them. He was loath to tell them that he had Ron's wand in his pocket. Then he started to panic; would Ron really do this? He had to get more time, give Ron a chance to reconsider. "I was wondering, Malfoy--how did you and Ron get out of the cells where Snape took you?"

Malfoy shrugged nonchalantly. "My dad was already in the castle, waiting down in the dungeons. He let us out. Simple. And you aren't the only one who knows secret passages out of that place..." He smiled and handed Harry's wand to Ron. Wormtail was still pointing his wand at Ron.

"Now, Weasley. It's up to you. One of them lives, one of them dies. The one who lives, you put the Cruciatius Curse on them. That comes first. Think about it; choose carefully. No matter what you decide, the Dark Lord will be pleased, I think. It's not many Death Eaters get to enter his service so auspiciously. You'll be quite a celebrity among dark wizards. You've craved celebrity, haven't you? I saw your face all last year, every time Potter was getting his picture taken, or an article about him appeared in the *Daily Prophet*. Well, it will be your turn to be in the limelight. This is your chance, Weasley. But don't forget--Wormtail and my dad and I have our wands trained on you. So just keep that in mind. Now, make your choice."

Ron stood between Harry and Hermione, only about six feet away, holding Harry's own wand. The two Malfoys stood about the same distance from Ron, each pointing their wand at him, and Wormtail did the same. Ron turned and pointed his wand at Harry, his arm shaking. Then he turned and pointed it at Hermione. Harry saw her pleading with her eyes. Harry wanted to say something but couldn't. What could he say? Should he ask to be the one to die? That would still mean Hermione getting the Cruciatius Curse. The thought made him want to cry, that she should ever experience anything so painful. He didn't want to plead to get the Cruciatius in her stead, because that would mean she would be the one to die. He decided against pleading with Ron not to do this at all; the three of them were pointing their wands at him. They could kill him in a trice, and then the two of them would still be at their mercy--or lack thereof.

Harry swallowed. He couldn't take a deep breath, it seemed. He looked at Ron's face; it was so different now, with the beard and mustache, and the wounds from his fight with Malfoy. And he was so tall. So different from the boy he'd first met on the Hogwarts Express five years ago.

Here was a man, not a boy. He held their lives--and his own--in his hand.

Suddenly, Lucius Malfoy, pointing his wand at Ron, cried, "*Crucio!*"

The curse hit Ron from behind, and he dropped Harry's wand, falling to his knees. As the pain continued, he fell to the ground, his arms out, his legs twitching, his scream echoing through the dark trees beyond the firelit clearing. Harry watched him in horror. This was completely different from watching Malfoy be tortured in his dream, or even experiencing it himself at the hand of Voldemort. This was his best friend, a half-dozen feet away from him, writhing and screaming in agony, while Malfoy's dad continued to send the pain through his body, through his mind.

After what seemed an eternity, Lucius Malfoy raised his wand. Harry turned his head, saw that tears were streaming down Hermione's face. And then, the echoes dying away, he realized that Hermione had also been screaming. Harry watched Ron try to get his breath back, lying on the forest floor, looking up at the night sky. Harry looked up at the sky too; he hadn't noticed when it had become dark. The impersonal stars winked at them, too impossibly far away to really affect human lives, he felt, no matter what Trelawney said. He looked back down at Ron, who was panting, but getting to his feet, with Draco Malfoy's help, holding Harry's wand again. "Almost forgot that," Lucius Malfoy said casually by way of explanation, as though he were talking about forgetting to leave his house with his coat or gloves. "Now you know, Weasley. Now you've felt it. Now you know that you have to do. It seeps down into your very bones, doesn't it, the fire, the pain? It's fresh in your mind now. Think of it; think of it and make your decision."

Suddenly, Harry heard it; heard the hissing. Hermione turned her head. She heard it too, but he couldn't tell her what Sandy had said. He looked at the others; the Malfoys and Wormtail were too preoccupied to notice, and Ron was too. Harry swallowed, knowing now what Ron's choice would be. *Should I tell her?* he wondered. *Or would it be better for her not to know...*

Ron was leaning heavily on Draco Malfoy still. Sweat beaded on his forehead; he was still reeling from the curse. Harry ached for him, even as he knew now what was coming. *Ron, Ron*, he thought. *If I could spare you from this I would, if I could turn back time and tell you what horrible things would happen to you by you becoming my friend...*

Ron was standing on his own again, feet spread wider apart for better support. His face was in shadow, the fire flickering in the middle of the clearing, limning him, a tall menacing figure who seemed to have nothing to do with Harry's best friend. The other three were arrayed behind him once more, their wands pointed at him. Ron looked at Harry, then Hermione. He raised the wand. His hand was no longer shaking, as before. Harry drew in his breath; Sandy was right about Ron's choice. Harry watched the end of the wand, his own wand. It seemed he could look nowhere else. Ron also seemed to be staring at the end of the wand. He opened his mouth, and louder and more terrible than his cries while he himself was being cursed, he uttered the word Harry had never thought to hear from his best friend, the sound echoing through the forest, through the night.

"*CRUCIO!*" .

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Transfiguration

Harry had been watching Ron's mouth, waiting for that second when it started to open, ever so slightly. Sandy had told him what to expect. He'd done this in the Dueling Club, trying to be a step ahead of his opponent. As soon as he saw that slight movement, he began the now-familiar divorce process, separating his mind and body. He seemed to be rising, floating up and away, away from corporeal cares and concerns.

"CRUCIO!"

The cry echoed through the forest, but to Harry, it was growing fainter and fainter, as his ears seemed to be filled with cotton, his nose and mouth filled with cotton, his fingers and every inch of skin, his muscles and every bit of him down to his bones strangely insensate. He found that he was in fact floating above his own body, looking down on Ron and Hermione and the Malfoys and Pettigrew. There was a thread of amber light that connected the wand in Ron's hand to Harry's body. He watched that dynamic thread with fascination, at the way it slowly crackled and jumped. Ron's mouth was still open, he was finishing pronouncing the curse. Everything looked like it was moving oddly sluggishly to Harry, in this floaty universe. He saw that Hermione was looking at him--or, rather, at his body--with her mouth forming an O of horror. Perhaps she was screaming again; he had no way of knowing. Whether her horrified expression was because this was Ron, their friend Ron whom they loved, putting the Cruciatus Curse on him, or whether it was because that meant *she* was the one he'd chosen to kill, Harry did not know.

Then, also moving with what seemed to be excruciating slowness, Draco Malfoy turned and pointed his wand at his father. As he turned, his hair flew up and stayed momentarily suspended in the air longer than it should have, as though he were moving underwater. Another crackling ray of light was emitted gradually from Malfoy's wand; after what seemed like an interminable wait, it reached his father. Harry saw his mouth moving lethargically.

STU-PI-FY...

Lucius Malfoy dropped his wand, which seemed to float down to the ground like a feather, and then he began to fall with an impossible slowness. Harry saw Pettigrew turn his head with a laconic air that made him seem rather bored. He pointed his wand at Draco Malfoy, and Harry saw that now he was the one moving his mouth to form the dreaded curse.

CRU.... the mouth began. Ron lifted the wand, breaking the connection between it and Harry.

-CI.... Pettigrew's mouth formed the next sound. Malfoy was still watching his father fall. Ron then pointed his wand at Harry again.

-O.... the mouth finally formed the last sound required to finish the spell. As the amber thread of light arced inch by inch through the air, Harry saw Ron moving his lips again.

Fi--ni--te...

The curse struck Malfoy from behind, as his father had done with Ron. He threw his head back slowly, sinking to the ground as if he were a marionette being carefully lowered to the earth, except that Harry could see the agony on his face, his features evolving from normal to tortured bit by bit, as though Harry were seeing a film, frame by frame, of a man being eviscerated.

In--can--

Draco Malfoy's body hit the ground finally, his mouth open in a silent scream--at least to Harry, who was still altered, still divorced from his body, existing out of time, apart from the world in which these languorous creatures lived.

--ta--tem....

Ron finished and pointed Harry's wand, sending an azure thread of light arcing through the air to where he was still bound. The vines slowly leapt away from him and, seeing this, he willed himself to slide back down into his body. He was jolted by suddenly having his hearing back; the first thing he heard was Hermione's scream, already in progress, and Draco Malfoy's agonized yelling, forming a macabre duet. Both seemed likely to go on for some time; in fact, it almost immediately began to seem like background noise to him.

Ron was standing very close to him, looking down into his face. "You back?" his best friend asked simply, leaning in so Harry could hear. Harry nodded, blinking, disoriented. Everything seemed to be moving at lightening speed now. In a swift, all-encompassing glance, he saw Lucius Malfoy lying on a carpet of leaves, stunned, and Draco Malfoy writhing in agony on the ground, while Pettigrew kept his wand trained on him.

Then Harry willed it, and it was so; it was his fastest transfiguration yet. It was so fast he had no chance to think of the pain. His paws struck the ground, but only for a split second before he was running to the spot near the fire where Pettigrew stood. He turned, a look of abject terror blossoming on his features as Harry leapt into the air, preparing to knock the man to the ground, breaking the curse that would have reduced Draco Malfoy's brain to pulp if it continued for much longer.

But when Harry landed, all four of his feet were on the ground, not the wizard's body; standing trembling under his stomach was a dung-colored rat with a silver paw, looking up at the apparent lion standing over him for only a moment before giving a strangled-sounding squeak and running toward the trees, all four paws moving too fast to be seen.

After a moment's hesitation, Harry gathered his wits and followed the rat. He had practiced flying, taking several steps along the ground before leaping into the air, but he had never before simply *run* with four legs. He couldn't have flown in the forest; his wingspan was too great, and if he flew above the trees, he wouldn't be able to see the small rodent. Harry let his animal instincts take him over, his paws moving surely and rhythmically under him, a rolling sensation like flowing water. He felt his hide rippling with his footfalls, felt his mane flying out behind him. The trees were mere blurs. Running on four legs was *wonderful* he quickly decided, but the thought passed as he strained to keep up with the rat, blending in perfectly with the forest floor, except for the silver paw which flashed as he ran, giving Harry a sure way to stay on course. Harry did not know how far or in what direction they'd been running. The rat could corner faster than him, being much smaller, and he did this often, making up for the fact that his tiny paws would have been quickly outpaced by Harry's stride if they'd only gone in a straight line for long enough. Each time the rat changed direction, Harry did too; it took him longer to adjust, though, and he was starting to tire. Harry kept his eyes to the ground about twenty feet in front of him, watching for the flashing silver paw. It took him a while to realize that he was seeing in the dark, that he *could* see in the dark. He wondered whether he would run into any of the fiercer residents of the forest, but then threw out that idea as unworthy of concern; he would be able to vanquish any creature he came across in his griffin form, he was sure.

As he continued to run, he reveled in the feeling of invincibility running through his veins. *I can do this*, he thought. *I can get Pettigrew at last, and clear Sirius' name.* The rat changed course again, and ran into a clearing. Harry's eyes adjusted just a split second too late to the brightness in the clearing, from the enormous fire in the middle. He hadn't noticed it; he'd been wholly focused on following the rat, who was now running under something brown that looked oddly like the arch of an enormous foot. He was going into a space that was a mere one foot off

the ground; Harry would not fit in such a space. He started trying to go around the obstacle, to find where Pettigrew might have to come out on the other side, but suddenly, a great hand swooped out of nowhere, picking Harry up around the middle while he squirmed and writhed in its grip.

“‘Ere now,” said a booming voice above him. “What ‘ave we ‘ere? A lion? What the ‘ell?”

But Harry didn’t have any time to waste; Pettigrew was getting away, might already be impossible to find in the legion of trees. Harry opened his mouth in a protesting roar, then brought his sharp teeth down on the giant’s hand, between thumb and forefinger, which is soft, sensitive skin even on a giant. The giant roared in pain and flung him off. Harry flew across the clearing, striking a large tree hard, his head and side aching acutely as he slid to the ground and promptly changed back to a human, teenage boy with black hair and green eyes. He looked up at the amazed behemoth for a moment before the darkness overcame him.

* * * * *

He was aware first of the voices. It would be impossible not to notice them; even a person who had lost his hearing or had never had it would feel the rumbling vibrations coming up through the ground, through his bones. The sound was hurting his head; he was starting to wish he *was* deaf, or maybe he was wishing he were dead, dead rather than a failure, rather than having let Peter Pettigrew get away again...

He slowly opened his eyes, seeing a crowd of stars in a sapphire sky. He tilted his head to his left and saw an enormous fire with a makeshift spit constructed of a long branch resting on two Y-shaped saplings half again as tall as he was. A large animal was roasting on the spit, fat dripping into the flames, but Harry couldn’t make out what it was without the head and hide. His first thought was to be disgusted, but his second was that the roasting meat smelled heavenly, and he felt his stomach move within him in primal, feral need.

He turned his head to his right and saw a familiar face. When she saw that he was awake, her face was wreathed in smiles and she put a tentative finger on his cheek. It was the size of his leg. “There yeh are, Harry. I was startin’ ter worry...”

“Fridwulfa!” called another one of the giants. He strode into the firelight and squatted down next to Harry. “What the ‘ell do yeh think yer doin’? Yeh should have left’im somewhere far away from the camp! Humans aren’t supposed ter know we’re ‘ere!” The voice was like an explosion, or a mountain being hurled at another mountain. Harry held his head in pain at the noise of it.

“Sssssh!” Hagrid’s mother cautioned him. He realized now that she had been speaking (for her) in a whisper, so as not to deafen him. Harry tried to get up, but the best he could do was to prop himself on his elbows so he could look around the camp properly. There was a sharp pain in his ribs on his right side when he did this. He assumed that was from striking the tree when he was thrown; probably more than one broken rib. He gritted his teeth and looked around the clearing.

This was a much larger space than the place where he’d been tied up with Ron and Hermione. He’d been unable to judge its size from the air. The fire alone was the half the size of Hagrid’s cottage. He wondered whether it was a magical fire, requiring no fuel, or whether, after they’d let it burn long enough, there would actually be any forest left for them to hide in.

The giant who had come over to Hagrid’s mother seemed bigger than she was, maybe half a head taller. He was ruddy, with long, unruly dark brown hair, one continuous eyebrow above his bulbous, warty nose, and glittering dark eyes. The rest of his face was hidden behind a tangle

of beard and mustache that could have hidden a large community of vermin--and perhaps it did. Harry had to make a great effort not wrinkle his nose at the giant's smell. He tried to tell himself that there couldn't very well be many places where someone so large could bathe, but on the other hand, Hagrid's mum wasn't reeking like that...

"Well," she said to him in an indignant whisper, "ef you'd keep yer voice down, it would be a good start! Pro'bly heard you clear over in Hogsmeade! He's one o' Rubeus' friends, and he needs help." She drew herself up to her full height, glaring at him, and Harry sincerely hoped they would both watch where they put their feet, so they wouldn't crush him. He didn't feel able to stand yet. He was aching all over, but he didn't think it was from being a golden griffin so much as being hurled against a tree by a giant--the same giant standing before him now.

"All right, all right," Fridwulfa's companion grumbled more quietly than before; now he was merely the volume of a thunderstorm. He had a large, dirty piece of cloth wrapped around his hand, bright blood showing through it. He waved the hand at Harry.

"Can yeh tell me what the 'ell 'appened to the damn lion what bit me 'and? I looked where I thought 'e should be, and there *you* were, 'alf dead, and not the good 'alf." He squinted at Harry for a second and then said, as an afterthought. "Name's Orst."

Harry nodded at him. "Harry," he said weakly.

"What?"

"I said, 'Harry!'" Harry shouted, then started coughing from the effort. Fridwulfa moved to pat him on the back, but he waved her away; it was bad enough having Hagrid do that, let alone his mum. It felt like his ribs were pushing directly into his right lung. So she pushed toward him what looked to Harry like a tub of water--Harry supposed it was supposed to be a drinking cup of some sort for the giants--and, wincing, he pulled himself to a standing position so he could lean over it and scoop his hands into the water. He brought his hands to his mouth, handful after handful. He hadn't realized how parched he was.

While he drank, Fridwulfa was lecturing Orst again, in her giant-whisper. "Yeh got ter be still ter hear humans, ye great blockhead! There's no call ter make'em shout. I din' have no trouble hearin'im, I din'."

Orst sat down by the fire, making the earth shake as he folded his legs economically underneath him. When he was settled, Harry felt like he could take a breath again. He looked up at Fridwulfa, still leaning on the edge of the cup of water.

"How long have I been here?" he wanted to know.

Fridwulfa looked up at the stars. "Night's about 'alf-spent, I'd say. You were in a bad way."

He pointed up at Orst's hand with the bloody cloth. "You want me to fix that?" He was feeling somewhat responsible. Orst looked at him suspiciously.

"You a doctor or som'ting?"

"No. A wizard. I go to the school."

Orst looked like he was considering this, and finally he unwrapped his hand and put it down on the ground near Harry. Harry took Ron's wand out of his robes and pointed it at the bite marks he'd left on the giant's hand. Madam Pomfrey had made sure that everyone who sat with Neville was proficient in medical binding charms, to prevent him bleeding too much if he hurt himself. After putting the charm on the giant's hand, he told Orst, "It won't bleed any more. But you'll still have to keep it clean while it heals."

"Thanks," he grumbled at Harry. Harry thought that had something to do with the 'keep it clean,' advice. He looked like he and cleanliness were not exactly on speaking terms. Harry

reached up to run his hand through his hair, his usual nervous habit, but when he did, he felt above his right ear a bump that made him wince.

"I might have concussion, I suppose," he said to Fridwulfa. "And I think I have some broken ribs. I should go to the hospital wing..."

"Now, don' you worry. I can bind up yer ribs. Ye'll be back at the school in the mornin'. I'll take ye to Rubeus, and he'll take care o' ye. Righ' now ye need rest." She produced a strip of ecru cloth, and after struggling with the tiny buttons on Harry's robes, he took them off himself and pulled his shirt over his head. There was a purpling bruise on his lower right chest. Hagrid's mother wrapped the cloth several times around his ribcage and pulled it tight; Harry gasped at first, so she loosened it slightly. When it was tight but he could still draw breath (albeit painfully), he replace his shirt and put his robes back on as well. Despite the proximity of the huge fire, Harry felt a chill.

He looked up at Fridwulfa's face, so like Hagrid's. It was a comforting face, oddly motherly. Harry couldn't put his finger on it. He thought of how comfortable it was to be around Ron's mother, when she was bustling around the kitchen or sitting by the fireside reading the *Daily Prophet* aloud to her husband, or even lecturing the twins or sighing over Bill's hair. Other people's mothers, he thought. I'm always latching onto them...

The aroma of the roasting meat crept into his nostrils again and he breathed it in with a sigh. She picked up on it immediately. "Hungry?" she asked softly. He looked at the spit and nodded. "That there won' be done fer a while. This is all righ', though." She picked a bit of meat off of a carcass that was sitting on a sheet-sized napkin next to her, holding it out to Harry. He sat down again and reached up to take it from her. The morsel was the size of a small roast chicken to him, but it smelled savory and warm, and he held it firmly in both hands, ignoring how hot it was. He was too hungry to care.

Then he remembered, and lowered the meat, swallowing painfully. He tried to make sense of everything that had happened. Malfoy had said that Ginny was acting, that he wasn't really assaulting her, and he'd made Ron choose one of them to torture, and one to kill. But Sandy had told him that he was the one Ron was going to torture, and he'd been ready, he'd left his body behind and watched the odd, slow-motion scene play out before him, of Malfoy turning and stunning his dad as soon as Ron had cursed him, and then Wormtail coming around and cursing Draco Malfoy, while Ron stopped cursing him and released him from his bonds. He remembered chasing Wormtail through the woods, watching him run underneath Orst's foot, then being picked up by Orst, and then after biting him, being flung against a tree...

He brought the meat up to his mouth again; after blowing on it, he took another bite. It was gamy, vaguely liver-flavored. Maybe it was something's liver. He stopped thinking about that, chewing thoughtfully. *Malfoy did it*, he realized. He had gotten his dad. He had succeeded.

While he, Harry, sat bruised and possibly concussed in the giants' camp, knowing that Wormtail was on his way back to Voldemort to tell him Harry Potter was an Animagus...

Harry Potter is an Animagus.

He'd never thought those words before. Not like that. It was odd. He still didn't think, *I am an Animagus*. And yet, when he saw Wormtail torturing Malfoy, his first instinct was to change to his Animagus form and chase him, predator and prey, through the primeval forest. And now Voldemort would know. He looked up at Orst, wanting to curse him, but instead he felt his eyes fill with tears; he couldn't have known. He just knew he saw a lion, of all things, come out of nowhere. He probably hadn't even seen the rat with the silver paw; a rat would be beneath a

giant's notice, not even food. Orst probably cleaned things bigger than rats out of his teeth. If he *ever* cleaned anything out of his teeth. Harry winced and looked away from the giant.

He took another bite of meat, looking around the camp as he chewed. Three other giants had come to sit on the other side of the fire. One was whittling a large tree trunk into a tapered shape for some unknown purpose; another was turning the spit patiently, silently. They were both men. Another giantess was sitting with her cheek on her hands, staring at the fire listlessly. They don't seem especially happy here, Harry thought. He wondered where the others were, but looking down at the meat in his hands and at the carcass roasting on the spit, he figured they were probably out hunting. This lot must eat quite a load, he thought.

He only ate about half of what Fridwulfa had given him, and then he leaned over the cup of water and scooped some more into his mouth. He took a final handful of water, and after he took off his glasses, he splashed it over his face, then used his robes to dry off and replaced his glasses. He looked up at Hagrid's mother.

"Where shall I sleep?"

"C'mere me lad," she said in a comfortingly rumbly voice. She led him to an animal fur she'd laid out on the ground; it was grey with white streaks at the edges, and silky soft. When he'd lain down, she placed another hide with the same coloring on top of him, fur side down, so that he was sandwiched in softness. He pillowed his head on his arm, trying not to think about Wormtail getting away, or Ron knowing about him and Hermione. He closed his eyes, thinking of mothers, remembering his own mother in the Pensieve, tucking him into his cot and singing him a Welsh lullaby. The warmth of the fire and the furs lulled him into a deep sleep, where his mother was waiting for him...

* * * * *

Harry awoke to raucous birdsong. He opened his eyes and looked up, seeing a white, cloud-covered sky above the canopy of trees. He pushed the top fur aside, then sat up, pulling his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around his legs. His ribs didn't hurt as much this morning. The fire still burned; now something else was roasting on a spit. It looked like a series of hares skewered like shish kebab, making gamy smells waft through the camp. They must constantly have something cooking, he thought. The only giant he could see was Fridwulfa, a huge mound about ten feet from him, flat on her back and breathing deeply. Perhaps the other giants slept under the trees, deeper in the forest.

He gazed around the clearing, at how everything looked so different in the daylight. He realized that the only other time he'd slept outdoors was when he'd been with the golden griffin. The Dursleys had never taken him and Dudley camping; they'd never even taken Dudley camping, leaving Harry with Mrs. Figg. Aunt Petunia believed firmly that humans became human when they invented central heating and indoor plumbing and refrigerators and microwaves and coffeemakers and hairdryers, and if there was someplace in the world where those things didn't exist, it was a backwater and a hellhole and she wanted nothing to do with it. She thought Luddites were hopelessly backwards and right up there with the flat-earth lunatics and the psychotics who thought the American government had faked the moon walks. Voluntarily sleeping outdoors, on the ground, cooking over a fire food that had just been killed (meat came from the butcher) and bathing in a stream was simply beyond the pale.

Bathing in a stream...suddenly, Harry felt like that would be wonderful, but he didn't even know where there might be a stream nearby. Perhaps he should wait until he returned to the castle and take a shower. And he'd have to see Madam Pomfrey, to get his ribs healed first. He checked

his watch; it was only six o'clock. He rose slowly and went to Hagrid's mother, wondering what was the best way to wake a giant.

He stood next to her ear, trying to decide what to say, when Orst came into the clearing, a brace of deer hanging from one hand. He flung the game down and pulled out a knife, presumably to begin skinning the carcasses.

"Orst!" Harry called, hoping for some help. The giant turned, looking around behind him, as though he suspected the trees had learned to talk. "Over here, Orst!" he called more loudly. The giant looked in the right direction now and nodded at him.

"Ah! Harry. Sleep well?"

Harry nodded. "Not too bad. But I really need to get back to my school. Can you wake Fridwulfa for me?"

He nodded and strode across the clearing, the ground shaking beneath Harry's feet. He shook Hagrid's mother, muttering, "Get up, ye lazy..."

She started to stir, mumbling incoherently. Harry backed up as she put her hands out to support herself, pushing herself up. When she had rubbed her eyes and managed to open them, she saw Harry and smiled.

"Well! Good mornin' then. Sleep well?"

He nodded. "The furs were very soft. I should probably get back to the castle, though. I hoped you could help me."

"O' course, dear lad. Be happy to." She rose to her full height and bent over, asking demurely, "Could I pick ye up?"

He nodded, and he sat on her finger, again straddling it like a broomstick. He looked at the giants' camp; it seemed forlorn, a sad place to live. And they were here most of the winter, he remembered. On the other hand, perhaps it was an improvement over the mountains of Ukraine and Georgia. He watched the camp disappear through the trees; Fridwulfa kept her right hand with Harry on it against her stomach, and pushed the trees aside with her left hand. It seemed that they traveled through the forest for a very long time when Harry could finally see the Hagrid's hut through the trees.

She set him down carefully. "There ye go, Harry. I can't go no closer. Got to stay in the forest. Tell Rubeus I'll see 'im later."

He smiled up at her. "I will. Thank you for everything."

"Any time," she said firmly. She started to turn away, then stopped and faced him again.

"Harry? Can I ask ye a question?"

"What is it?"

"Well, when Orst asked ye about the lion, ye never answered. And not too long ago, I was tellin' Rubeus that I'd seen a golden griffin flyin' around above the trees, and that looks like a lion with wings. And then righ' after that lion turns up and bites Orst, ye're lyin' there, dead to the world with a nasty bump, as though it was *you* 'e threw against the tree, not a lion."

Harry looked up at her guiltily. He knew her secret. It would only be fair if she knew his. Plus, she was dropping great hints that she already suspected or knew anyway. He smiled sheepishly. "That was me. Both times. The griffin you saw flying and the lion that bit Orst. I'm a golden griffin Animagus, but when I don't have my wings spread they blend in with my coat and I look like a lion. But no one's supposed to know. You can't tell the other giants, even Orst."

She nodded and smiled. "I won't. Don't worry, me lad. Per'aps I'll see ye soon." With another fond look and a smile, she turned and pushed the trees out of the way again, disappearing back

into the forest. Harry turned toward Hagrid's cabin and soon had reached the edge of the trees. He went to Hagrid's back door, knocking lightly. He checked his watch; it was seven now. It had taken almost an hour for Fridwulfa to get him here, and that was with the huge paces she could take. The giants' camp must be very, very deep in the forest, he thought. He had no way of judging this when he was in the air; flying gave him a completely different perspective on distances.

He heard Hagrid moving around in his house, then heard the front door opening. Hagrid had gone to the wrong door. He knocked again on the back door. More shuffling. He opened the right door this time, a shocked expression appearing on his face.

"Harry! What're yeh doing here? Are yeh all right?"

Harry nodded, staggering into the room, then sitting down heavily in a chair. "Need to go to the hospital wing. Is everyone else all right?"

Hagrid harumphed. "I don' know ever'thin' that's goin' on, but it's mighty queer. Dumbledore can tell yeh more than I can. He an' Moody got back late las' night."

Harry nodded. "I'll see him soon, I'm sure. Can you--can you help me get to the hospital wing?"

Hagrid practically carried him to Madam Pomfrey, who clucked her tongue over the bump above his right ear, wanting to know how he'd gotten it.

"Um, I'd rather not say. I need to see the headmaster. And I think I broke some ribs."

Now she harumphed. "He's finally back from London, and not before time..."

Harry furrowed his brow. She was being odd. Then he remembered that just the previous afternoon, he had carried Ginny into the infirmary, apparently in shock from being assaulted by Malfoy. *Was* Ginny really in on it all? "It" was clearly not the recruitment of Harry, not after what he'd seen in the forest. "It" was getting Lucius Malfoy put away. Harry laid back on the bed, wondering what the full story was.

Then he noticed that there were curtains pulled around three other beds in the infirmary. After Madam Pomfrey had put a healing salve on his ribs and a clean bandage (he also had refused to tell her where he'd gotten the soiled-looking rough cloth that had been binding his ribs), she left the room. He went to the first bed, pulling the curtain open slightly. Ron was there, resting on his back, snoring away in a white hospital smock, his feet hanging over the end of the bed. He looked peaceful and healthy and safe and Harry closed the curtain again, thankful that he seemed to be all right after Malfoy's dad put the Cruciatu*s* Curse on him. He went to the next bed and opened that curtain a small amount. Hermione was curled up on her side; her eyes opened as soon as he parted the curtains, and a smile spread across her face. He sat on the edge of her bed, looking down at her, wondering what they would do next, how to go on after the revelations of the night before. She was under the influence of that potion for *six months*. She pulled herself to a sitting position, yawning and stretching, her hospital smock moving in various interesting directions as she did this, making Harry catch his breath. She saw his eyes and smiled at him, putting her arms around him, her head on his bare shoulder. He tentatively put his arms around her, kissed the top of her head. They would have to take it a step at a time, he decided.

Then he heard the curtain to the bed next to Hermione's being opened, and there was the face of Draco Malfoy above yet another hospital smock, looking at them embracing, a strange sort of hunger behind his eyes. He shook himself, as if forcing himself to think about something else, and said by way of greeting, "So, Potter. Decided to join us in hospital. All done running around

the forest as a lion, I see. Damn! Trust you to do something like become an illegal Animagus. You get away with everything.”

“I’m not illegal. And I’m not a lion.”

“What? You’re sure as hell not registered. And I think I know a lion when I see one.”

“I have permission from the Ministry to wait until after I graduate to register. McGonagall trained me, starting last fall. And a lion can’t fly.”

“Fly? What do you mean, fly?”

“I’m a golden griffin Animagus.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again, shaking his head. “Unbelievable...” he muttered.

“And,” Harry continued, “you’re not to tell anyone about it. I was only trying to get Wormtail.”

Hermione pulled back from him and looked at his face. “Did you?”

He shook his head sadly. “No. He went into the gi--” He looked at Malfoy. “Tell you later.”

Malfoy looked at Harry, then Hermione. “What? Oh, come on, you can trust me.” They looked at him skeptically. “You can! Didn’t I get my dad? Didn’t I say I would?”

Harry swallowed. “You didn’t say *how* you were going to do it. Is--is Ginny all right?” He was almost afraid to ask, holding Hermione in his arms. She nodded.

“Yes. Turns out it *was* an act. And after she determined that the four of us had gone to the forest, she asked Madam Pomfrey to get Snape to come here to the infirmary, and she explained to him what the plan was, and apologized for her part in it, since--well, when that happens for real, girls that are really in trouble that way need for people to take them seriously. But she said it was her idea; she knew that Ron would go crazy, and it would feed into the plan. Snape and McGonagall flew to the forest on broomsticks, and they took enough extras for us to ride back Snape brought Malfoy’s dad back. We had to fly way up above the trees...I think I liked the--other--flying better.”

“So Ginny’s not here?”

“She’s back up in Gryffindor Tower. The Weasleys have stayed over. Oh, and we’ve all been given the day off from classes, if we like. I’m going though; please say you are too? I’m so glad you’re back. I was terribly worried...”

She pulled his face down to hers and Harry clutched her to him, ignoring a twinge in his ribs, drinking her in. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and saw that Draco Malfoy was watching them with a smirk on his face.

“Um, do you mind, Malfoy?”

“Yeah, I mind. I mind that you think you can watch me and Ginny snogging, but I can’t watch you two...”

“Malfoy, you said some--some bloody awful things last night. In fact, even if you *were* only *acting* like a total sodding bastard, you were doing a far-too-good job. I’m not really feeling like being charitable toward you just now.”

“I said those things to Granger. It was part of my performance. And I apologized last night, after we got back, didn’t I, Granger? Except for one thing--sorry I made you spew, Granger.”

“Well,” Hermione said sweetly, “you can’t do much about your face.”

“Ha ha,” was Malfoy’s rejoinder.

“So,” Harry said, trying to forget the things Malfoy had said, since it seemed Hermione had gotten past it. “It really worked? Your dad’s going to Azkaban?”

“He’s still stunned, down in the dungeons. Ministry officials are coming later to get him. He’ll be charged with multiple counts of trying to recruit people to be dark wizards, conspiracy to

commit murder for ordering the hits on recruits' families, and putting the Cruciatus Curse on Weasley."

A sound behind him made Harry jump. It was Ron, coming around the bed. He stood there awkwardly, his hand on the mattress, looking at Harry and Hermione. His hospital smock was rather short, showing his pale, freckly, knobby knees. Harry pulled back from Hermione, sitting on the edge of the bed. He wanted to stand up and give his best friend a great hug, to show how glad he was that Ron was all right, but he looked in Ron's eyes and saw the hurt and betrayal there, and knew that it wasn't time yet. He was also suddenly self-conscious about having nothing on from the waist up, just his basilisk amulet, the bandages around his ribs, and, on his left arm, Sandy.

"Do you know how hard it is to sleep with you lot sitting over here yammering?"

Malfoy laughed. "I didn't think anything could wake you. Ginny says you sleep straight through all the noise that ghouls make at your house."

Ron scowled. "I'm not sure I believe you about her..."

"I swear I have never done anything more than kiss her," Malfoy said, looking sideways at Harry. *Well*, Harry thought, remembering Malfoy's wandering hands on Ginny's birthday; *It wasn't for lack of trying*. "Do you want to see if a unicorn will go up to her? Do you?"

"All right, all right. Fine. You were just trying to get me wound up yesterday, I get that. What if I'd decided to kill you? Where would you be then?"

"Well, then *I'd* probably be at the ministry explaining why I'd killed *you* in self-defense," he drawled, clearly not lacking in self-confidence after the previous day's events. Ron swayed slightly, and Malfoy got up and pulled him over to sit on his bed. "Stupid git! Sit down! Having the Cruciatus Curse put on you is no laughing matter. You don't see me poncing around the room, and I've gone through it before." Harry tried not to smile; Malfoy's similarity to Snape was uncanny. Harry remembered Snape telling him to sit when he had come to his office after throwing off the pain of the Hara Kiri. *That's what chairs are for, Potter*.

The four of them sat in silence now, looking tentatively back and forth at each other. It reminded Harry strangely of the previous evening in the forest, Malfoy and Ron on one side, he and Hermione on the other. Suddenly Malfoy broke the silence. He looked at Harry, then Ron, shaking his head.

"I just cannot believe that the two of you have sex lives and I don't."

Ron smiled at him and suggested, "You could get a new girlfriend..."

Malfoy gave him a challenging look. "I could. I could, for instance, take *your* girlfriend...or Potter's..."

At that Hermione burst out laughing and fell back on the bed; she started to pound the mattress, helpless in the grip of the laughter. Her hospital smock had ridden up a little when she did this. Malfoy tilted his head to one side.

"When you do that, Granger, I can see your knickers..."

"Shut up!" Harry and Ron said simultaneously, while Hermione abruptly stopped laughing and sat up, pulling her Hogwarts robes off the chair beside her bed and draping them over her lap. So much for Malfoy only *acting* like a sodding bastard, Harry thought. While she was clearing her throat and starting to return to a peach color from her previous deep red, something else occurred to Harry.

"Ron--what exactly did Malfoy say to you, before you were untied? How did he convince you to go along with his plan, just like that?"

Ron grimaced and looked at Malfoy for a moment, then back at Harry and Hermione. “He told me that he’d never--slept with Ginny, he was only trying to get his dad put away--I don’t even remember it all now--”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I can tell you exactly what I said. I had to practice it enough ahead of time, and that was after writing something like ten drafts of it. I needed to make sure I communicated all of the necessary details as quickly as possible. My exact words were, ‘Put the Cruciatus Curse on Potter. He can take it, he won’t feel any pain. When you do, I will stun my dad and Wormtail. Take the curse off Potter and untie him and Granger. I never touched your sister; she’s helping me put my dad in Azkaban.’”

Hermione snorted. “*That* took ten drafts?”

“Hey, I got my point across.”

She looked at Ron. “So those things you said--” she said softly.

Ron looked uncomfortable. “Just trying to make it look good. Didn’t want Malfoy’s dad to suspect anything.” But Harry remembered the way he’d spoken to her, the edge to his voice. There was a grain of truth to it. Those things didn’t just come out of Ron’s head at that moment; they’d been festering.

“But,” Hermione said, looking perplexed. “You didn’t stun Wormtail.”

Malfoy grimaced. “Don’t remind me. He was too damn fast for me. But what I want to know, Potter, is why can you do that pain-blocking stuff, and I can’t? And it looked like Weasley couldn’t, either.”

Harry didn’t answer the question. He still hadn’t gotten an answer about that himself, from Snape, and he also hadn’t dared to ask Dumbledore. But it didn’t matter, because Ron was speaking instead. “I could do it a little in Moody’s class,” Ron told him. “But that was just the Passus Curse. And thanks for telling me your dad was going to do that. I really appreciate it.” “No need to get sarcastic, Weasley. I wasn’t any better off than you. And I was hoping that you’d start the curse on Potter before that. You took so damn long...”

“Listen, just because you don’t think twice about putting your dad in Azkaban, doesn’t mean I don’t think twice about putting a curse like that on my best friend, no matter how likely it is that he can take it!”

Malfoy looked at Ron in silent fury, and Harry wasn’t completely certain that they weren’t going to start rolling around on the floor again throwing punches. “That was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,” he said softly to Ron. “If you think I did that without any thought...” He shook his head. “I don’t have to justify myself to you. If you want to know why I planned this, why I wanted to do it for *years*, just ask your sister. Now get off my damn bed.”

“Malfoy...” Hermione started. She clearly was over being ogled by him. “You know what the real reason is. Why you did it now, why you finally did what you’d only been *thinking* about for years...”

Malfoy looked at her; Harry was startled by the exposed expression on his face, how totally without artifice he was suddenly. He finally looked away from her, staring at his hands. “Ginny,” he said simply. Ron looked at him for a second, then away.

“Did someone say my name?” Ginny came around Hermione’s bed, smiling at Malfoy and Ron. “Look at the two of you! Sitting next to each other! Not fighting!” She sat down between them, and took their hands in hers. She looked back and forth between the two of them. “Well? Are you actually trying to get along?”

Ron and Malfoy glanced at each other behind her head. She turned and looked at Ron, while

Malfoy stuck his tongue out at Ron and made a rude face. Ginny turned to look at Malfoy and he instantly converted his features into a beatific smile, while Ron returned Malfoy's rudeness with the middle finger of his left hand, out of Ginny's range of vision.

Harry tried to stifle a laugh, and suddenly Ginny jerked her head up, dropping Malfoy's and Ron's hands. "Harry!" she cried in surprise, standing. "You're back!" She pulled on his hand, and then he was standing and embracing her, his arms across her back, his face in her hair, so glad not to be comforting her after being attacked, to learn that she was never in danger, that she wouldn't be traumatized. He felt her fingers pressed against the bare skin of his back, above the bandages, and ignored the pain in his ribs as unimportant. Then he lifted his head and saw Malfoy and Ron looking at him; Malfoy's face looked stormy and Ron's slightly disgruntled and intrigued all at once. Harry released her and stepped back, sitting back down next to Hermione. He glanced at her for a moment; she was frowning, but she reached for his hand and laced her fingers through his, the frown fading from her face as she leaned her head on his shoulder again. Ginny was just smiling happily still, and sat down between Ron and Malfoy again. Harry remembered the murderous thoughts he'd had while tied to the tree in the clearing, before Malfoy's plan had become clear. He remembered Malfoy talking about his seducing her, and her seducing him. He had believed it; now he wondered how he could have done that. He looked at her, recalling that Professor Sprout had said that she was a good girl, she wouldn't be needing any potion made from spleenwort. She looked as fresh-faced as ever, and he now also remembered her telling Malfoy that she wasn't on some schedule, "like a bloody train." She saw him looking at her and smiled back, a simple, friendly smile. But something was missing; he realized that she used to smile at him more tentatively, with a wistful hopefulness behind her eyes. Now that she had Malfoy, he realized, that was gone. Instead, when she smiled at Draco Malfoy, there was a serene happiness that made her glow as if lit from within; he returned her smile with a clear hunger in his gaze, a wistfulness of its own kind, but also a clear affection. For the first time, seeing that, Harry decided that he probably meant it when he said that he would never hurt Ginny. He was also clearly not interested in changing girlfriends.

"So," she said to Harry, still smiling sunnily. "Draco told me--you turned into a *lion* and went after Wormtail! Did you catch him?"

So Harry had to explain again that he was a golden griffin Animagus and that he hadn't caught Wormtail, although once again, he didn't mention the giants. The four of them were suddenly full of questions about the difficulty of Animagus training, and didn't hear the door to the infirmary opening and closing, nor the footsteps approaching them.

"Ahem!" came a familiar voice. It sounded remarkably like Aberforth, but Harry wasn't at all surprised to look up and find that it was the headmaster. They stopped talking suddenly, in the middles of sentences. Dumbledore looked at them strangely seriously.

"Harry! I didn't know you had returned. We were all very worried. You spent the night in the forest?"

"Yes, sir. I--I'll tell you about that later, if you don't mind."

"Yes, yes. I'm sure that will be interesting. But at the moment, you might want to get your robes..."

Harry leapt to his feet, crossing the infirmary quickly. Dumbledore waiting for him to button his robes and sit next to Hermione again.

"I have some news for our two suspended students," he said sternly. Malfoy and Ron jerked their heads up, looking alarmed. "Thought I'd forgotten about that, did you?" Then a slow smile

spread across his face. “The news is that you aren’t suspended. Last night you were all very informative about your various parts in the scheme to apprehend Lucius Malfoy. But you *did* all break a number of school rules along the way, and I’m afraid points *will* have to be deducted from your houses as a result...”

Their faces fell; Harry in particular thought how unfair it was that four of them were from Gryffindor. Their house would suffer the most. He thought of first year, when he and Hermione had been responsible for losing Gryffindor quite a lot of points when they were caught leaving the Astronomy tower after helping smuggle Norbert to safety. He wondered what kind of reception they would get in Gryffindor Tower when the news of their losing points for the house spread.

“First: Draco Malfoy. Seventy-five points from Slytherin for charming the doorway to the Charms classroom. Pranks are one thing; Professor Snape felt that leaving us without a Charms instructor for forty days, and leaving Ravenclaw without a head-of-house and a Seeker for their Quidditch team all because you did not do proper research may even be grounds for making you wait until next year to take your Charms O.W.L.s. However, Professor Flitwick talked Professor Snape out of that and insists he wants to let you sit for your tests this year, so consider yourself lucky. Another seventy-five points from Slytherin for staging that appalling little drama in the Potions dungeon. I never want to hear of such a charade again.”

His eyes bore into Malfoy who swallowed and looked properly admonished, nodding and saying softly, “Yes, sir.”

Now he turned to Ginny. “Virginia Weasley: Fifty points from Gryffindor for *your* part in the Potions dungeon play. I believe Professor McGonagall already gave you quite an earful about that last night, so I will say no more at this time. Suffice to say I am very disappointed in you.” Ginny drew her lips into a line and nodded. Harry wondered what McGonagall had said; she could really go off when something touched a nerve with her, as this obviously had. She’d been quite upset when she thought Malfoy had attacked Ginny. He didn’t imagine she would appreciate discovering how her emotions had been manipulated.

“Ronald Weasley.” He looked up at the headmaster with that strangely mature expression Harry was still getting used to. Madam Pomfrey had healed all of his wounds, but he had some bruises on his cheekbones and jaw that wouldn’t fade immediately. “Fifty points from Gryffindor for that fight in the Potions Dungeon. I understand you truly thought your sister in danger, but there were better ways to handle it. Suspension is the usual course of action in cases like this, but considering the other events of yesterday and the reason for you being provoked into the fight, I think I will leave the penalty at fifty points.”

Ron nodded grimly at him. “Thank you, sir.”

“Hermione Granger and Harry Potter!” Harry jerked his head up in surprise. Had he heard about their relationship? Were they going to be removed from the ranks of the prefects?

“Twenty-five points each from Gryffindor for flying off to the Forbidden Forest--does *no one* remember the name of that place?--without telling anyone why or asking for help. What were you thinking?” But he didn’t pause for an answer. He suddenly stopped looking grim and smiled as though he hadn’t just deducted one-hundred and fifty points from each of their houses. Harry grimaced; when they got back to Gryffindor Tower, their names were going to be mud. And Malfoy would have to contend with the Slytherins alone. He didn’t envy him--for many reasons. Harry looked at Dumbledore now, confused by how cheerful he looked. He clapped his hands together and looked round at them all. “There. We’ve got the unpleasantness out of the way.

Now for the good.” He looked at Malfoy again. “Draco Malfoy. For concocting a truly Slytherin-like plan to put a Death Eater away who also happens to be your own father, three-hundred points for your house.” Malfoy got a very cocky grin on his face and looked at Harry very smugly. Harry looked away.

“Virginia Weasley, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger: Fifty points each for Gryffindor for helping to bag Lucius Malfoy. And Harry Potter: One-hundred fifty points for Gryffindor for the excellent job overcoming, er, painful curses, the fine job you’ve done in your work to become an Animagus—which no one here will discuss with anyone, or I start throwing memory charms around—and,” he paused and looked at Ginny again, “for *helping* Ginny when you thought she was in great need, rather than fighting.”

He smiled at them all. “And finally, I decided that you all needed to have another bit of recognition to strengthen you in the times to come, so I just came up with this last night, and I hope you like it. I’m very fond of it myself, but—well, here it is.”

He held up a small gold-colored brooch with the letters OP in the middle, flanked by wings with red enamel over the gold metal, and what seemed to be flames coming up from the letters, also with enamel, but rather than being a single color, the flames actually looked like flames, moving and changing every second, white and yellow and red and orange and sometimes even a little purplish-blue. They all stared dumbly at the headmaster, unsure what to make of this. He sighed and held it out to Ron, then took others out of his pockets and distributed them round to the rest of them.

“It’s the Order of the Phoenix. Now, I know it’s not the Order of Merlin, but I really couldn’t nominate the five of you for that—you broke too many rules along the way.” His eyes twinkled at them. “So I made up my own Order of the Phoenix, to recognize the work of people who have dedicated themselves to bringing dark wizards to justice. I know that to young people, an award like this is a piddling thing. It’s not hundreds of galleons or a chance to meet your favorite Quidditch player, I’ll grant you that. But it’s my way of saying thank you, that I think we’re fighting on the same side and that I trust you to do the right thing. Oh, and I’m also having some house elves work on some lovely parchments that can be framed and hung on the wall. *Paid* house elves,” he said pointedly, looking at Hermione.

He smiled round at them all, even Malfoy, Harry noticed, who actually seemed to have some color in his face after Dumbledore’s speech.

“You are the first members of the Order of the Phoenix. I am very proud of you all. I know that this has been difficult for you, but there is one more difficult thing that you must do soon.” He looked at each of them in turn. “There will be a trial at the Ministry of Magic. You will probably be called to be witnesses. I will accompany you to the Ministry myself for the trial. I will try to get the procedure streamlined down to one day, to avoid you missing a great deal of school, since four of you have the O.W.L.s coming up. You may not all have to testify, but I’m certain that you will, Draco. That will be difficult, testifying against your own father in court.” He looked sympathetically toward Malfoy, who already looked uncomfortable. Perhaps, thought Harry, he hadn’t thought about this part. *Testifying against your father*. He tried to imagine it, and couldn’t.

“And you will also likely testify, Ron, since you were on the receiving end of the Cruciatus Curse that is going to be the basis for his life-sentence.” Ron swallowed, looking down at his OP. Dumbledore slapped his hands together. “Well! I must be going; the ministry is sending someone to collect Mr. Malfoy from the dungeons. Go enjoy your breakfast!” he said cheerily,

as though he hadn't just been discussing Malfoy's dad going on trial and unforgivable curses. After the door to the infirmary closed, Harry noticed that Ron had a dreadful panicked look on his face.

"Are you okay, Ron?"

He shook his head, looking worse by the second. "Harry; I put the Cruciatus Curse on you. And Dumbledore knows about it too; we told him last night. If they ask him or any of us about that--I'll be spending the rest of my life in Azkaban." His voice had dwindled to a whisper at the end. He swallowed and looked terrified and alone, suddenly separate from the rest of them, who had plenty to worry about, but going to Azkaban wasn't one of those worries.

Suddenly Malfoy pushed at Ron with his left hand, wrapping it around Ginny's shoulder afterward. "Hey, Weasley. Are you *sure* you put the Cruciatus on Potter? I mean, I personally don't think you could. You probably couldn't give a hemophiliac a nosebleed. Did you feel any pain, Potter? When Weasley tried to curse you?"

Harry furrowed his brow, wondering what Malfoy was on about; then he caught on and smiled. "Pain? No pain at all. Not a bit. You say you put the Cruciatus Curse on me?" He smiled at Ron, who then started smiling too. "I mean," he went on, "I think I'd know if someone put the Cruciatus Curse on me. I've felt it before. I can testify to that in court." Then he had another thought. He drew Ron's wand out of his robes, where it had been all night. "And isn't this your wand, Ron? If the ministry is curious about whether it's been used for the Cruciatus Curse, there's a simple test they can do..."

"My wand!" He took it from Harry. By now, Ron was absolutely grinning at Harry and almost looking like he was going to start laughing. Then he did laugh, throwing his head back and then sighing with relief afterward. Harry felt a happiness leap up in him at seeing Ron smile back like that. There would be a time of healing, he knew, but he somehow felt that they could in fact go on now.

Ginny put her arm through Malfoy's and her head on his shoulder. "She's almost got you tamed, hasn't she, Malfoy?" Hermione said, looking at them.

Malfoy looked down at Ginny and said softly, "*Mais, si tu m'apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l'un de l'autre.*" She looked like she might very well melt.

Ron reached behind Ginny and *whapped!* Malfoy on the back of his head. "Hey! Stop speaking French to my sister!"

"*But if you tame me, we shall need each other,*" Hermione translated in a quiet voice. "It's from *The Little Prince.*"

"Wasn't he a Parselmouth?" Malfoy asked her, not tearing his gaze away from Ginny's.

"Who?"

"The Little Prince."

"Oh, that's right! He was talking to that snake in the desert. But he looked more like you, Malfoy, than Harry." She smiled at Harry. Then a hissing was heard from the vicinity of Harry's left arm. "What did she say?"

"Who is this Little Prince?" he told her. He hissed back at Sandy. "I told her never mind." Hermione laughed. "Maybe I'll get used to that eventually...But I don't know whether I gave the best translation of that line you said, Malfoy. 'Apprivoiser' can also mean 'to domesticate.' Are you going to domesticate him, Ginny?" she laughed. Ginny turned her head and smiled, breaking the bond between her eyes and Malfoy's.

"Won't someone have to domesticate me first?" She looked at Malfoy again, losing her smile

when she saw how serious his face looked. He leaned close to her again and spoke softly.

“Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde.”

“You shall be for me unique in all the world. I shall be for you unique in all the world,”

Hermione whispered, looking at Harry. He swallowed, wishing no one else were around just now.

Ron hit Malfoy on the back of the head again. “I said stop that! And you,” he said to Hermione. “Stop translating for him!”

They all broke up into laughter, even Ron. Ginny kissed Malfoy on the cheek and left the infirmary, and Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek before closing her curtains and preparing to dress for breakfast. Harry rose and followed Ron to his hospital bed, stopping him with his hand on his arm. Ron looked at him expectantly, but what he was expecting, Harry didn’t know.

“Ron,” he said softly. “Are we all right?”

Ron looked at him for what seemed a long time. “No. And yes. Not yet. But--eventually. I think we will be.” He tried to smile at Harry, and Harry smiled feebly back. It wasn’t everything he’d hoped for, but it was enough for now.

* * * * *

After breakfast, Ron and Ginny and the twins bade their parents goodbye. Mrs. Weasley did not hug Harry though, or talk to him or Hermione. He felt strange, watching her leave the Great Hall with her husband. Did she hate him now? he wondered. Had Ron told her about him and Hermione? He didn’t know what to think. Her being upset with him was very nearly as bad as Ron. He looked at Hermione, sitting next to him. She had noticed Mrs. Weasley’s behavior as well. She didn’t look happy about it either. He remembered when Ron’s mother had snubbed Hermione after the Witch Weekly article about her toying with Harry’s and Krum’s feelings. He dreaded finding out what she thought of Hermione now, if Ron had told her about their physical relationship.

On the other hand, he thought, she could be upset with them about Malfoy. They had both known. And he had vouched for Malfoy before the Weasleys, all of them, and they had looked at him suspiciously, as though perhaps he should go off and be in Slytherin house now with the other snakes-in-the-grass. Regaining Ron’s trust would be difficult, he knew. But he didn’t just have to work on Ron; all of the Weasleys now regarded him differently, and he felt awful about that. He’d always felt so at home with them, almost like they had adopted him, and now, remembering the way Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had looked at him, as though he’d mortally wounded them by not revealing Ginny’s relationship with Malfoy, was almost more than he could bear.

Harry pulled Ron and Ginny aside before they left the hall to go to classes, asking them whether they’d told anyone about him and Hermione. They looked at each other, brows furrowed, then at Harry.

“You mean you’re still not going to tell people?”

“Well--we’re going to come clean about being a couple. But--does everyone need to know about all of the details?”

Ron smirked. “You mean like--McGonagall?”

Harry widened his eyes and hit his head. “McGonagall! I hadn’t even thought of her! She doesn’t know, does she?”

Ron and Ginny looked at each other. Harry’s heart sank. Then Ron laughed. “You should see your face, Harry! No McGonagall only knows you’re a couple. Not that you’ve been--”

Coupling, thought Harry.

“--you know,” Ron finished lamely, his ears turning red. Harry nodded.

They went to class. Harry was a bit disoriented and started going out the front door to Hagrid’s, but Hermione dragged him to the stairs to the Potions dungeon. For a moment he’d forgotten what day it was. Harry hesitated before entering; the last time he’d been here, he’d seen Ginny and Draco Malfoy, and Ron...

Somehow, he got through the class. They weren’t covering anything new; Snape was snidely going over material they would need to know for the O.W.L.s, hinting broadly that *none* of them would get O.W.L.s in Potions because they were hopelessly incompetent and stupid. Oddly, the only person he didn’t seem to look at when hurling insults around was Neville, who was working next to Malfoy again. Snape actually took points from his own house because of Crabbe and Goyle repeatedly poking Malfoy when they thought Snape’s back was turned. The other Slytherins weren’t any kinder to him. Harry hoped Malfoy would hex them when he got the chance. He wondered how he was going to be able to continue living in Slytherin.

Harry was jolted when, at the end of class, Snape called out to him, “Potter! I need a word with you; Dueling Club business.” Harry sent Hermione along ahead of him. Ron and Parvati and the others had already left. Harry shouldered his bag and followed Snape into his office; the next class wouldn’t be arriving for a few minutes. Snape closed the door and nodded at the chair near the fireplace. Harry sat down and looked at him expectantly. When Sirius’ head appeared in the fireplace, Harry jumped.

“Harry! I didn’t mean to startle you. Severus contacted me last night and told me everything he knew. I won’t ask for a complete recap now--that can wait. I just wanted to see you, make sure you’re all right.”

Harry nodded at him. “As well as can be expected...At least I’m not in too much trouble for staying in the forest all night...You know about--who’s in the forest, right?”

“Yes, Severus told me.”

“Well, I was in the giants’ camp. Hagrid’s mum took care of me. And this morning, Madam Pomfrey decided that this nasty lump--” he touched the tender spot above his ear “--will go away, and I don’t have concussion. And I had some broken ribs, but she took care of that. They’re already feeling much better. So I guess everything’s okay. Except--”

“What?”

Harry hesitated. When he finally spoke, he couldn’t keep the tears out of his voice. “I’m sorry, Sirius. I tried to catch him. I really tried. I kept thinking, if I can just catch Wormtail, you can be cleared...”

Sirius smiled ruefully. “Harry, I don’t want you losing sleep over that. You did what you could, and Lucius Malfoy will be going to Azkaban, if the trial goes as expected. You’ll have to go, won’t you?” Harry nodded. “Well, it will be a quite an experience, I daresay. I wish I could go with you, but for obvious reasons...”

“I wish you could too.” Harry swallowed. He thought he would lose it if he had to go on talking to his godfather much longer. “Listen, Sirius, I’d better go. I’ll talk to you again soon.”

Sirius smiled warmly. “Goodbye Harry. I’m very proud of you. Don’t forget that.”

His face disappeared. Harry turned to Snape. “Thank you for that. It’s nice to be able to talk to him more often...” he trailed off, looking at the strange expression on Snape’s face. He actually seemed to be somewhat proud of Harry himself, and for once not hiding it. Harry felt his chest hitch; without knowing it, maybe Snape’s approval was something he’d been craving more than

he knew. Perhaps because he knew it would never, could never be lightly bestowed. Snape looked away now, as though he just realized that he was not hiding his thoughts well enough. "Potter. I meant what I said about having Dueling Club business to discuss with you. We will be doing an end-of-term demonstration for the school after exams, while the students are waiting for their grades. We will begin preparing for the demonstration during club meetings on Sundays. Understood?"

Harry nodded. He didn't need Snape to say the things Dumbledore and Sirius had said. Some small gestures were enough. He smiled at the Potions master and shouldered his bag again. "Understood." He turned and left, his heart lighter than it had felt for some time. Somehow, he had the feeling that everything was going to be all right.

* * * * *

After he was done eating lunch, Harry looked up to see Dumbledore standing next to him. "Harry," he said briefly. "A word."

Harry nodded and rose, following the headmaster up out of the hall, up the stairs, up and up, finally arriving in the study at the top of the moving spiral stairs, after Dumbledore gave the gargoyle the password. ("Custard rolls")

Harry sat in a chair facing the desk and Dumbledore, rather than sitting behind his desk, sat in another chair next to him. He peered at Harry, as though trying to tell whether there was a difference in him compared to the last time he'd seen him. Harry started to squirm from being so scrutinized.

"Would you like to give me the story of what happened last night, from your perspective?"

Harry looked at him levelly. How much had the others told him? Did he know about him and Hermione? But then he thought about how many years Dumbledore had been headmaster, and how many years before that he'd taught at the school. Surely he couldn't be ignorant of Madam Pomfrey's liberal distribution of Prophylaxis Potion? Harry decided that he was tired of editing himself. He felt Dumbledore was the one person he needed to tell everything to. And so he did. When he was done his recitation, the headmaster leaned back, examining Harry again. Harry didn't have a clue what he was thinking.

"So," Dumbledore said suddenly. "You want to know why you can block pain?"

Harry frowned. He did, but he hadn't asked. Perhaps now he would find out...

"It's because you know you can."

Harry frowned even more deeply now. "What?"

"Harry, do you remember when you conjured the Patronus that held off hundreds of dementors when you were only thirteen?"

"Yes..."

"And you did it because you realized you'd *already* done it?"

Harry nodded. "But what does that have to do with this?"

He smiled. "Do you know that Professor Moody has never accomplished the pain blocking?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "What?"

"Nor have I. You, more so than most wizards, Harry, are highly suggestible. When you believe that you can't do something, you usually can't. Your attitude defeats you. But when you are led to believe you *can* do something, oddly enough, you usually can. You can leap on a broomstick when you've never done it before, and fly like Charlie Weasley. You can conjure a Patronus most adult wizards couldn't produce. You can overcome *Imperius* almost on the first try. You can block curses like *Hara Kiri* and *Cruciatus*. I told Professor Moody to introduce the idea

of blocking pain into the curriculum. I wanted to see whether any of you were so suggestible that you could do it, just because you were told first that it was possible. And I wasn't a bit surprised to learn that you'd mastered it."

"So Moody was lying to us when he said we would master it by the end of the term? He couldn't do it himself? It isn't something Aurors usually learn?"

He shook his head. "No, Harry. If it were, Neville Longbottom's parents wouldn't be in St. Mungo's."

Harry furrowed his brow. "About Neville; is that why he did so well dueling when he was on the Eutharsos Potion?"

"Do you know what that potion does?"

"It makes you feel safe whether you are or not."

"Exactly. It's another case of mind over matter. That's all that much magic is, Harry. Those of us who are witches and wizards do have magic in us, but the training you receive here teaches you to focus and put your mind to a spell, to believe that it will work the way you want it to. You are very good at putting mind over matter, Harry, and I see you getting better at it year by year. Hermione has better study habits, it's undeniable. And Evan Davies has far better grades--as do several other fifth-year Ravenclaws and a couple of Hufflepuffs. As for the other Gryffindor students in your year, besides Hermione...compared to them, you admittedly look rather good. Although Ron Weasley has undergone quite an improvement this year. But grades are not everything; your inner focus is more pronounced than in any wizard I have seen come through here for a long time. As such, your greatest deficiency is also your mind--when you let it convince you that you are *incapable* of something. Your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness. Do you understand what I'm saying, Harry?"

Harry nodded, thinking about his duel with Voldemort, forcing the bead of light into his wand, forcing it to regurgitate the previous spells it had cast.

"And Voldemort?"

"Voldemort? When he was a student here, he was very, very much like you. Better grades, though. And he put on more of a show of following the rules." He looked at Harry over his spectacles. "Sometimes you don't even *bother* about that, Harry."

Harry felt his face grow warm. "I remember when I met the young Tom Riddle. He said we were a lot alike, too. When we were in the forest...when I offered to become a Death Eater if they would let Ron and Hermione go, I thought about that. About whether I was going to become just like him."

Now Dumbledore smiled. "That is something you do not have to worry about, Harry. No proper Death Eater ever did it to protect people they cared about. If you go into that with the intention of doing good, don't you think it rather defeats the whole purpose?"

Harry hadn't thought about that before. "But why do they threaten the recruits with hurting people they care about?"

"That's just until they're in. Then they have to hurt--*really* hurt--someone. You would never have been able to do that, Harry." Harry remembered Draco Malfoy cursing Karkaroff. He remembered Ron cursing him. Ron was hoping Harry could do pain blockage, but still...

"You are too self-sacrificing to make a proper Death Eater, Harry. As much as Pettigrew seems to have convinced Voldemort to recruit you to repay his debt to you, I think Voldemort has agreed to that plan for a different reason..."

"What?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It took him years to achieve the level of power he had attained when the killing curse rebounded on him, giving you that scar. I believe that in the last year, he has come to realize that it will take years and years again for him to climb back to that level of power. Unless he finds a shortcut. Unless he finds a very powerful wizard who will become his servant, and let him absorb his power... You have in you a great deal of the power he lost when he cursed you, more than he has right now, I daresay. He has realized that he needs you alive, to draw on that power."

Harry looked at his hands. "I still don't want anything to happen to Ron or Hermione. They can still be used against me. I'd rather give him all my magical power than see them hurt--or see *anyone* else hurt."

Dumbledore smiled. "But it's precisely because of that that you can't possibly give up your power to him, even if you wanted to. I'm guessing that he doesn't understand that yet. It's alien to him. That's why your mother's sacrifice protected you, Harry. And that's why I trust you." Harry looked at Dumbledore, trying to understand consciously everything he'd said, but he gave up on that and decided that perhaps the best thing was to comprehend it *unconsciously*. He tried to quiet the voices inside him, throwing out one idea after another. He felt a peace come over him, and suddenly, understanding lit up his brain in a startling epiphany. He looked levelly at Dumbledore, very calm.

"I understand."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded at him. "Because you know that you can." Harry smiled back, leaving the study more at peace than he'd felt in a very long time. For once he didn't feel like he was leaving Dumbledore's office with more questions than he'd entered. But he still had quite a lot to think about.

Your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness...

* * * * *

The next morning Harry felt like going running again. He hadn't gone the day before. As he opened the wardrobe door, getting out his running shoes and shorts, Ron opened his bedcurtains and peered at him sleepily. "Going running?"

"Yeah," Harry said shortly, undecided whether it would make him happy for Ron to come along. Ron rose and retrieved his own running gear. Finally, Harry put his shirt on while Ron was tying his laces. "Let's go," he said tersely.

When they reached the common room, it was deserted. Harry checked his watch; it was ten minutes after seven. They waited another five minutes, but Harry decided they should leave. "If she were coming, she'd be down here by now." He took Sandy off his arm and left her by the fireside.

When they reached the Quidditch pitch, they did the warm-up exercises in silence, then rose and started running on the sandy path. Afterward, they were doing the warm-down exercises when Ron suddenly looked up at Harry and asked, "When did it start?"

Harry was jolted. "What?" he said, realizing even as he said this what it was that Ron meant. "You and Hermione."

They'd been going through the motions of normal school life since returning from the forest, as though nothing had happened, although there were times when Harry saw Ron looking at Hermione strangely. He put his chin on his knees to consider his answer.

"Well, there was this time we almost kissed at my house, just before we left to come to the Burrow. No, wait, there was the time she was sunbathing in the garden. Actually, maybe it was

when she kissed me on the cheek before the summer holiday, at the station.” He frowned; then he went back to his thoughts when they’d consummated their relationship. “No,” he corrected himself again. “In a way--it started when I noticed at the Yule Ball how pretty Krum’s date was. I was, of course, still insanely obsessed with Cho Chang, but even I could see that. Then I realized it was her. And you were such a prat to her; I wanted to kick you,” he said, but smiled. Ron nodded.

“That’s true. A total prat.”

“And when Krum wanted to talk to me about her, what really struck me was that he actually thought of *me* as a rival. He said she talked about me all the time. I told him it was because we’re friends, and he let it go at that. Of course then everything around us starting going crazy, Barty Crouch and all that, but later in the summer, I still remembered him saying that she talked about me all the time.”

Ron shrugged. “Well, you’re Harry Potter...”

“Yeah, yeah, I survived the killing curse. Of course, when she sent the photo...”

“Right. The photo.”

“...*then* I gathered that she might be interested in me. That was before Bulgaria.”

Ron couldn’t deny this. “True,” he said simply.

Harry looked at his face. “Ron, you’re still my best friend, right?”

“Right,” Ron said, hesitating only a moment before answering.

“I don’t want to hide anything from you. I want to tell you everything.”

Ron widened his eyes, looking both hopeful and apprehensive. “*Everything?*”

“Well, okay, not everything...” He realized how that must have sounded. “But there are some things you don’t know, and there’s no bloody reason to keep them from you now.”

“Like what?”

“After the dream I had on Christmas night, I screamed bloody murder. Hermione heard and--she slept in my bed with me the rest of the night. And the next night. And the rest of the holidays. We just slept. I still miss that at times. It was so comforting just having her there, hearing her breathing in her sleep, feeling her warmth next to me...” Harry trailed off, feeling a flush rising up from his neck. Ron narrowed his eyes.

“I’ve never done that. Slept in the same bed with someone else...” Harry couldn’t tell whether Ron sounded envious or it was just a statement of fact.

Harry sighed. “Of course, there came a time when I had trouble not thinking about--certain things. So I moved to another bed.” He decided that Ron didn’t need to know it was *his* bed.

“Which did no good, because she followed me, wanting to know what was wrong, and then she told me it was after midnight--this was New Year’s Eve--and she wished me Happy New Year and kissed me and--” He looked down. He couldn’t go on.

“Well?” Ron said, looking wide-eyed. Harry realized he’d rather left him hanging.

“Well,” Harry hesitated, “I, er, stopped what we were doing, and then Sandy told me a dark wizard was coming. I went rather insane. I put Hermione in the corner under the Invisibility Cloak and I hid under Dean Thomas’ bed, aiming my wand at the door. Of course, it was Sirius.”

Ron’s jaw dropped, then he burst out laughing, flinging himself backwards and rolling around on the pitch. Harry felt laughter bubbling up inside him, too, and soon he too was laughing loudly. After a while, Ron sat up, wiping his eyes.

“Oh, Harry,” he said weakly. “Thanks. I needed that.”

Harry shrugged. "Glad I could amuse you by being such a sodding idiot."

Ron shook his head, standing. He helped Harry to stand too, then put his arm across his shoulder. "It's not that. Okay, it's that a little bit. I think I thought..." he trailed off. "I thought it was all rainbows and champagne and sappy stuff like that. And it was probably sneaking around to snog in dark uncomfortable places, and making up ridiculous excuses, and insane-sounding alibis...None of it sounds remotely romantic or something to be jealous of. I should have known you'd bollix up your first real girlfriend experience. Cho doesn't count, of course..."

"Of course..." Harry mumbled, feeling more than a little insulted, but if thinking of his and Hermione's relationship as one horrendous, disastrous encounter after another cheered him up, he wasn't feeling inclined to correct him. Then he was struck by something Ron had said that was just a bit upsetting. "What do you mean, 'first' girlfriend?"

Ron stopped walking for a second, then resumed his course, moving ahead of Harry so he couldn't see his face. "Oh. Nothing. Nothing at all. Let's go..."

* * * * *

Harry told Ron about the way Snape had actually been quite decent to him when away from other people, the way he let him use his office fireplace to communicate with Sirius, and the fact that he was on a first-name basis with Sirius. Harry and Hermione told Ron together about the things they'd seen in Snape's Pensieve; his mouth was open in shock much of the time. His first reaction to the thought of Snape kissing Lily was the same as Harry's.

"*Eeeew.*"

His second reaction to their recitation of the Pensieve events was to look at the two of them strangely, and say softly, "Um, you do realize that you two have been finishing each other's sentences?"

Harry looked in surprise at Hermione, who then smiled, lacing her fingers through his and leaning her head on his shoulder. Harry looked at Ron, who gazed with an inscrutable expression at them both, then looked away.

After a few days, the rest of the people in the Gryffindor common room started acting normally around Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny. At first, everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells around the four of them, but now games of chess were being played, and Exploding Snap. The twins were telling jokes and people were laughing at them. There no longer seemed to be a pall cast on the place. Most Gryffindors simply greeted the news that Harry and Hermione were a couple with equanimity, as though they'd thought that all along (many of them had), so it didn't cause any significant ripples in the daily life of the house. The extent of their relationship was not common knowledge; only Ginny and Ron knew that. Ginny's and Draco's relationship, however, was still under wraps, for the most part. The twins knew, of course, and weren't particularly happy about it, but so far they hadn't tried to decapitate Malfoy. They *had* tried to offer him some Ton-Tongue Toffees, but Ginny had forewarned him, so he declined, looking, Harry thought, like he was wondering what he'd gotten himself into.

The focus of concern in Gryffindor Tower returned to Neville. There were many people who still treated Neville very carefully since his recovery, which was clearly wearing on him. Neville sometimes would retreat to the dorm to sit on his bed reading, catching up with his schoolwork, but then Dean or Seamus would go up to sit with him. He had started to look a bit annoyed about this. At one point Harry was on his bed reading for the O.W.L.s while Neville was doing the same on his. Neville looked up at Harry.

“You don’t have to stay and baby-sit me, Harry. I’m not going to start secretly taking Eutharsos Potion again.”

Harry looked up in surprise. “I’m not baby-sitting you, Neville. I was here first, reading for Binns’ class. It’s just that it puts me to sleep, so I figured I might as well be on my bed, so I’ll be comfortable when it happens.”

Neville smiled in apology. “Sorry, Harry. I just feel like--everyone’s waiting for me to snap. But you know, they say if you’re reading something that might make you fall asleep, you should actually read it in the most uncomfortable place you can.”

“You’re assuming I don’t *want* to fall asleep, Neville,” he laughed, and Neville laughed too, then look a little surprised.

“That’s funny, Harry. I--I don’t remember laughing since--since I got back. It’s like people are trying not to say funny things around me.”

“Even Fred and George?”

“Even them.”

“Well, come on downstairs, Neville. If they’re not busy with their N.E.W.T. preparation, maybe they can give us both a good laugh.”

They left their books on their beds and went down the stairs to the common room. Before they had reached the bottom, however, they met Ron coming up the stairs, looking breathless.

“Oh,” he said anxiously, “Harry and Neville! Are Dean and Seamus upstairs in our room?”

“No,” Neville answered. “We were the only ones there.”

“Well, um--do you need to go back there real soon? I’d like some--privacy---”

Harry looked down and saw Parvati appear at the foot of the stairs. She didn’t look at Harry or Neville. Harry understood, and was a little bit wistful; he and Hermione were trying to be so careful about people knowing about their physical relationship, they hadn’t been alone together since returning from the forest.

Neville nodded at Ron, smiling. “Not a problem.”

“I’m putting a locking charm on the door, just so you know.”

“Fine, fine,” Harry said, trying not to sound too irritated as Parvati, averting her eyes, passed him on the stairs.

“It’s not for you two; last time Dean and Seamus thought they would ‘interrupt,’” Ron said.

“Let them know they shouldn’t even bother.”

Neville said he would, laughing, and Harry was glad to hear him laugh again. He was right; he hadn’t laughed enough since returning from the hospital wing.

Thinking of Ron and Parvati up in their room made Harry wonder where Hermione was.

Probably in the library, he thought, with O.W.L.s being so close. Maybe if they went up to Fluffy’s room...

But he didn’t bother to go look for her. He and Neville started playing Exploding Snap with the twins, and before long, they were all laughing hysterically and nursing small burns, mostly singed eyebrows. Then Harry excused himself to go to the lavatory. The twins hinted broadly that he was going to try to spy on Ron and Parvati, and Harry laughed, pretending to go along with this. He went up the stairs, not hearing any sounds from the dorm before he entered the lavatory. When he was washing his hands, he heard the door to the dormitory open and slam shut again, then open again.

“Parvati!” he heard Ron’s voice plead. Harry dried his hands on a towel; he stepped closer to the door and put his ear to it. He heard her footsteps return from the stairs, then the

unmistakable sound of a slap.

“You bastard!” he heard Parvati’s strangled voice, as though she were trying not to cry. Harry swallowed. He was trapped. Although perhaps if he opened the door and appeared on the landing with them, it could defuse the explosive situation he somehow felt was brewing.

“Parvati--” Ron pleaded again. “Come on! It happens to everyone...”

Now Harry was appalled; he did *not* want to know about this, not in a million years. How awful, he thought, imagining himself in Ron’s shoes. Now he knew for sure that he *shouldn’t* step foot out of the lavatory. Ron would die if he knew he had heard.

“It was a slip of the tongue...” Ron continued to try to placate her. What? Harry thought.

Obviously it wasn’t what he thought. Ron had *said* something to upset her. What could it be?

“A slip of the tongue? A slip of the tongue? Don’t tell me you haven’t been pretending I’m her *every time*. I’m not a bleeding substitute! I--I sometimes suspected, but when you actually *call* me by *her name* in the--in the middle of it--it becomes glaringly obvious! I am never speaking to you again, Ron Weasley!”

Harry covered his mouth in horror. It was even worse than he’d originally thought. He heard Parvati run down the stairs, her footsteps a rapid tattoo on the stone, receding now. Harry heard Ron take a step, then held his breath. What if Ron came in here? Harry thought fleetingly of running into a stall and standing on a toilet seat lid, hoping Ron wouldn’t find him. But then he heard the door to the dorm slam again, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He opened the door and stepped onto the landing just as Ron opened the door to their dorm again. He froze when he saw Harry. Harry felt himself flush, remembering what he’d just heard. Ron’s face was furious when he’d opened the door, then mortified when he saw Harry.

“Harry,” he said nervously. “How--how long were you in there?”

“Why?” Harry decided the best course of action was to feign stupidity and deafness.

“You didn’t hear our--our argument, did you? Me and Parvati?”

Harry swallowed. “You and Parvati had an argument?” he said, his voice higher than he wanted it to be. “I’m--I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ron looked at him as though he were unconvinced, but also as though he’d rather kiss Snape than admit what they’d been arguing about. “Yeah, well, you know. Women.”

Harry smiled feebly. “Women,” he echoed softly.

Or, he thought, a particular woman.

Hermione.

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty Trials

The train swayed gently as it moved through the verdant countryside. It was a beautiful late-May day, with a cloudless periwinkle-blue sky, and not a plant anywhere in sight that wasn’t green or blooming. It seemed a shame, Harry thought, to waste a day like this by going into grimy London. He would have liked to lounge about on the grass by the lake during lunch, perhaps getting some sun, lazily watching the ripples on the water made by the giant squid. That was his idea of how to spend a gorgeous spring day.

Harry leaned back in his seat, watching the scenery rush by. Hermione was sleeping with her head on his thigh, and he played idly with her curls. Her hair was getting longer and threatening

to be rather on the bushy side again. After he'd gotten his hair cut by Parvati, she'd also been getting Parvati to cut her hair when necessary, but she recently stopped. Parvati wouldn't tell Hermione why. The short-curls-style seemed to be the only way to combat the bushiness without impregnating her hair with gooeey gel, as she had for the Yule Ball.

Harry combed her lengthening curls through his fingers. He'd never minded her bushy hair, truthfully. He like that she mostly didn't care much about how she looked at all and still managed to look wonderful all the same. The only real vanity he'd detected was when she'd let Madam Pomfrey go on shrinking her teeth after the spell Malfoy had been aiming at Harry hit her instead and started making her resemble a walrus on steroids. On the other hand, he knew it was also quite inconvenient and painful to have orthodontia, so perhaps it wasn't really vanity that had led her to do it.

She shifted slightly and mumbled something in her sleep. Harry smiled down at her. He'd forgotten how nice it was to watch her sleep. He also was glad that they could be as physically comfortable with each other as they wanted (within reason) now that others knew about them. He could sit like this, her head on his leg, while one of his hands played with her hair and the other rubbed her back gently. They could sit in the common room, Hermione in an armchair, reciting potions ingredients from memory or the different uses of St. John's wort for Herbology, while Harry checked to see if she'd gotten everything right, leaning against the front of her chair, giving her a foot rub.

He wasn't clear about whether anyone knew about the extent of their physical relationship (although there had only been the two times). Once he thought he saw George and Angelina giving them a knowing look. He knew about *them*, Harry thought. They probably recognized the signs, he reckoned.

The train was going through a tunnel. Harry looked up and met Ron's eye. He was sitting in the seat opposite Harry and Hermione, nearest the window. Draco Malfoy was nearest the door to the compartment and Ginny was between them. Ron had tried to get between her and Malfoy when they'd boarded, but he wasn't fast enough. Ginny was asleep too; she leaned against Malfoy's chest, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her. They'd all gotten up quite early, two o'clock, in order to board the two-thirty local to King's Cross Station. The express only ran on September first, the last day of summer term, and to get students to and from home for the Christmas and Easter holidays. Anyone in the wizarding world who needed to get to London (or points in between) in the morning, but who couldn't Apparate, or who was traveling with someone who couldn't, such as small children, needed to get the early train. It made a number of stops, so that the trip to London took seven hours instead of six, as on the express. For some people, the ride was even longer, if they boarded before Hogwarts, way up by the northern coast. Harry found out there was even a wizarding ferry one could take from the end of the train line to the Orkneys.

Harry was feeling tired at first, leaning back and closing his eyes while Hermione stretched out on the seat, but by dawn, he'd rested enough, he felt. He anxiously watched the large variety of witches and wizards who boarded and disembarked from the train. He'd had the opportunity to see more of the wizarding world at the ceilidh, and the year before, at the Quidditch World Cup, and now he was seeing still more. Families traveling together, witches and wizards going to visit relatives. And soon they would arrive in London and go to the Ministry of Magic itself. Harry had no idea what the Ministry would look like.

"Ron," he said quietly, so as not to disturb Ginny or Hermione. Ron didn't answer him, although

he seemed to be looking right at Harry. "Ron?" he said again. When he abruptly moved his eyes up to Harry's, he realized that Ron had been watching Hermione sleep.

"Oh, Harry. What?"

"Has your dad ever taken you to work?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Normally he Apparates, so I couldn't have gone with him that way. And dad said the fireplaces at the Ministry aren't on the floo network for security reasons, so that isn't an option. Although they are used for communication--just not transportation."

"Well, it's in London, right?"

"Right."

"So couldn't you just go by floo powder to Diagon Alley, they go from there to the Ministry?"

Ron looked thoughtful. "Well, for that matter, it isn't like we live on the other side of the country from London....I think he just didn't want to take any of us..."

"Yeah, well, who *would* want a pack of Weasleys running around the Ministry?" Malfoy sneered. "Apart from Ginny, of course."

"Keep it up, Malfoy. That's the way to get accepted by my family. Just keep up the insults. Real smart."

Harry thought about why Mr. Weasley might not want his children wandering around the Ministry, but he couldn't think of anything. Every time a question about the wizarding world was answered for him, it seemed he had several more to take its place.

"You ever been there?" Harry asked Malfoy, who looked surprised at being addressed by Harry. He shook his head dumbly.

"No, Potter. My father--well, let's just say he may have had Ministry business at times, but he certainly never wanted me there for it. He knows a lot of high-ranking people, but..."

Harry frowned. He remembered Malfoy bragging that his dad knew all of the big movers and shakers at the Ministry. Would they try to get him off? Or perhaps they were running scared now, hoping they weren't associated with him in any way so they wouldn't also be under suspicion. If his own son was any indication, Lucius Malfoy didn't exactly inspire selfless acts of loyalty. "You reckon he was seeing people who work for the Ministry who're Death Eaters?" Malfoy shrugged. "Who knows? Could be he was just threatening or blackmailing someone to get them to do something he wanted. I overheard some things at home when I was younger, but it was usually luck. He never actually let me in on something big he was up to until after he took me to get--you know."

The Dark Mark. Harry nodded. Ron looked at him. "Has--has Ginny seen it?" he asked quietly. Malfoy shook his head.

"Have I seen what?" Ginny mumbled sleepily, starting to sit up and stretch.

"Um, nothing," Harry said quickly. Malfoy drew his lips into a line, looking like he didn't want Harry's help.

"Are we there yet?" Ginny asked, yawning.

Ron looked out of the window. "No idea. How long's it been, Harry?"

Harry checked his watch. "It's nine. Dumbledore said seven hours on the train, so it'll be another half hour."

Dumbledore and Moody were riding in another compartment. The headmaster had given the former Auror permission to cancel his classes for the day. Harry wondered for how many years Moody had wanted to get the goods on Lucius Malfoy. He would most certainly not want to miss the trial where Malfoy's own son would be testifying against him.

They sat quietly for the rest of the trip, Hermione still sleeping on Harry's lap. Ginny had taken Ron's hand in her right and Malfoy's in her left and grasped them firmly, clearly trying to send some of her strength into them. This day would be hardest for the two of them. Harry wasn't sure what he would be asked, but surely it couldn't be as bad for him.

As they pulled into King's Cross Station, Harry gently woke Hermione. She sat up groggily, as Ginny had. She smiled at Harry and kissed him on the cheek. He tried to smile back but all he could manage was a sort of grim worried look. Dumbledore appeared at the door to their compartment wordlessly, Moody behind him. They followed the professors unquestioningly, none of them having the least idea what to expect, except for Harry, who had at least seen the trials in Dumbledore's Pensieve.

They went through the barrier to come out in the Muggle part of the station in pairs, except for Moody, who went last. Moody and Dumbledore had not bothered with Muggle clothes, but wore traveling cloaks that didn't look too outlandish and disguised their robes well. Harry, Ron and Malfoy were all wearing black trousers with neat button-down shirts, Harry's in black, Ron's in maroon and Malfoy's in white linen. The girls wore the simple dresses they'd used for the ceilidh, Hermione's bottle green, Ginny's black. They all carried bags with their black Hogwarts robes, so they'd be properly attired for wizard court.

They proceeded to the King's Cross/St. Pancras tube station; Harry was surprised that they didn't attract more attention. He kept waiting for people to start staring and pointing, as though they could recognize witches and wizards even in Muggle clothes, but the Muggles they saw passed without noticing them, their gazes directed ahead at goals Harry and the others could not see or imagine. Dumbledore gave each of them some Muggle money for the fare. Ron and Malfoy stared at theirs. Ginny didn't bat an eye, but Harry recalled that she was taking Muggle Studies. They waited quietly on the platform, morning commuters still bustling around them. When the train came labeled BRIXTON, they boarded.

The stations passed, and Harry gazed listlessly out the window. Euston. Warren Street. Oxford Circus. Green Park....

Hermione grabbed his arm, pulling him toward the open door. "Come on, Harry. Didn't you hear Dumbledore say we're switching trains here? We have to go from the Victoria Line to the Jubilee Line." He stumbled after her, just missing being mashed by the closing doors. They walked to the Jubilee Line, and when the train finally came, they had to stand.

There was what looked like several dozen American students, around thirteen to sixteen years in age, crammed onto their car, one of their teachers lecturing to them loudly and non-stop about the history of the tube. She was about thirty and had that air of a slightly desperate single woman who was wondering how she'd gotten trapped in the life she was in. Her light brown hair was escaping from a sloppy French twist barely held in place by a large plastic clip, she paused every sentence or so to put eyedrops in her eyes (it mostly ran down her face, making her look as if she'd been crying) and her clothes seemed chosen to help her blend in with her students, who were all affecting a grunge look with lots of muddy-colored plaid shirts hanging on either anorexic or overweight frames. Only her didactic tone identified her as a teacher, and one who was alien to their culture, for that matter. Harry had quickly pegged her accent as some kind of Southern American strain, having seen a number of American films, whereas the students' voices he heard sounded flat and nasal, and sometimes a little sing-song.

"I think they're from Minnesota or Wisconsin," Hermione whispered to Harry. He nodded.

"Not the teacher, though," he whispered back. "She's Southern."

Hermione agreed, but didn't have an idea about a specific Southern state any more than he did. Harry noticed Ron, Ginny and Malfoy glancing with interest at the American students. Not only were they Muggles, they came from a different country. The three of them looked like they thought anything might happen, riding the tube with such aliens.

"Now everybody stay *together* as we disembark *from* the train," she drawled to her students. Her small voice carried surprisingly well, but Harry noticed that most of the students completely ignored her, carrying on animated conversations with each other about musical groups and who-liked-who, like normal teenagers. *Normal*, Harry thought. *What was normal?*

"We," she went on, "will be getting off," many giggles from the students, and Malfoy, "at Westminster, home of Parliament. Parliament consists of two houses. What are the two houses? Anybody? Anybody? Anybody?" Harry's heart had leapt into his throat. *Westminster*. He hadn't realized that switching trains put them on the same line as Westminster.

The students continued to ignore their teacher. "The House of--" she prompted them, drawing out the "of" until it almost sounded like she was singing it. "Commons," she finally said, also drawing that out, as though she would be willing to give someone partial credit for the answer even after she had started to pronounce the word. "And the House of--anybody? Anybody?" She looked round at the oblivious, chattering, walking hormone bombs. "The House of Lords," she said loudly, trying to drown out twenty different conversations and failing. "Now, the notion of a majority whip and minority whip in our government comes from the British Parliament. Can anybody tell me which party is in the majority and which in the minority right now?" She looked round at them again. They obviously didn't care a bit about British government. Harry remembered his days in school before going to Hogwarts. In his opinion, British children didn't care, either. "Anybody? Anybody? Does anybody know who the Prime Minister is? Anybody? Anybody?"

She was getting to be so pathetic Harry felt it was painful to watch now. Then the train began to slow down, and with a jerk, it stopped and the teacher had to shift gears and become a sort of shrill border collie, herding the students out of the train, making sure no one was left behind.

As the dozens of bodies shuffled toward the door in Doc Maartens and holey canvas basketball shoes, Dumbledore nodded at the five of them and said simply, "Come on." Harry swallowed. They were getting off at Westminster too.

Harry and the others passed through the doors onto the platform. The American teacher and her students were moving toward the stairs, having passed through the turnstiles. She was yelling directions and periodically quizzing them about British government. As the noise from their large party receded (they could hear repetitions of "Anybody? Anybody?" growing softer and softer) Harry looked around. There was the sign saying WESTMINSTER, just like in his dream. There was what looked like new tile on the ceiling and walls, and there--

"Oh, Harry," Hermione breathed. He nodded, walking toward it. He started to put his hand out to touch it, then pulled back. He swallowed painfully, remembering the people who had died there. Others were daily remembering them too; the spot had turned into a small shrine. There were flowers, some rather old now; photographs of people who had been killed, many of them children. The thing that broke his heart was the stuffed rabbit someone had left. Hermione picked it up, looking at it, tears in her eyes, before she replaced it.

Harry leaned closer to the wall and saw that there was what looked like paint applied over the tiles, and it appeared that the green legend POTTER was applied on top of the paint. "The paint is new," growled Moody. "But then, so's the tile. They've tried everything. New tile, new paint,

everything but taking the wall down completely, and every time, *that* reappears, like--well, like magic.”

So, Harry thought, it wasn't that the Muggles hadn't tried to eradicate it. Voldemort had seen to it that the green POTTER would continue to reassert itself no matter what.

“Well,” he whispered, “why *don't* they just take the wall down, then?”

“We don't want them to,” Dumbledore said softly. “Every time it's suggested, we subtly get everyone involved to forget about it.”

Harry frowned at him. “Why?” Dumbledore seemed to ignore him. “Now,” he said, looking around the platform. There weren't many people who had come to take the next train yet. “Ron and Ginny, you go first. Just walk toward the wall at a normal pace. Don't slow down, and don't tense up. We'll shield you. Go on.”

So they did. Harry watched them walk toward the POTTER on the wall, just as if they were approaching a doorway. Then--they disappeared. Draco Malfoy went next. Then Harry and Hermione. He stared at it. POTTER. He walked purposefully toward it, the horrifying, sickly green of the magical substance growing closer and closer. Then--he could no longer see it. He looked around at the odd corridor where Ron and Ginny and Malfoy already stood. In a moment, Dumbledore and Moody had come through and were standing with them.

Overhead and on both sides was terra cotta-colored brick. Large red-orange tiles covered the floor. It was like being in a large sewer pipe with a flat bottom. After arriving in the corridor, Dumbledore and Moody turned to the left and they followed. They walked what seemed a long way from the entry point, which Harry thought, did not look particularly distinctive on this side. *So, he thought, this is really why Voldemort attacked the Westminster station. He wasn't attacking the Muggle government; this is where the Ministry of Magic is located--and he marked the entrance with POTTER.*

“Thirty-seven,” Dumbledore said suddenly, and Harry realized that the reason it seemed he'd been walking looking at his feet was because that was precisely what he was doing. He'd been counting his paces. Dumbledore now raised his wand and Harry noticed that there was a slight indentation in one brick, which was the one Dumbledore tapped now with his wand. Suddenly, an archway appeared, and they followed Dumbledore and Moody through it. Dumbledore turned to Harry. “It's been a while since I've come this way, so I'm relieved that I remember how. It's about ten-twenty. We should be in place by ten-forty-five. The trial begins at eleven. Best to put your robes on now.”

They opened their bags and extracted their Hogwarts robes, pulling them on, buttoning, adjusting. Harry, Hermione and Malfoy wore their silver prefects' badges. Moody and Dumbledore removed their traveling cloaks. Dumbledore gestured to them and led them down a corridor identical to the first one. After a few minutes, it suddenly opened out into a large circular space, maybe twenty feet in diameter, with numerous doorways around the perimeter. It took Harry a moment to realize that the people on the other sides of the doorways didn't look right. They looked, he thought, as though they were images on a television screen. He watched a witch in deep green robes directing a pile of papers through the air with her wand. She moved from left to right, framed in a doorway labeled IUMO on the lintel. When she disappeared to the right of the doorjamb, it seemed that she should have reappeared in the doorway that was a mere six inches or so to its right. However, an imposing sandy-haired wizard in deep sapphire robes who sported rather prominent horns on his head moved toward the witch, such that Harry thought he would collide with her. His doorway's lintel was labeled CEC. He too disappeared,

and did not reappear in the IUMO doorway although it appeared that he should.

“That,” Moody rumbled, nodding at the doorway where the witch had been, “was Mafalda Hopkirk. Improper Use of Magic Office. The horned freak was Gilbert Wimple. Committee on Experimental Charms.”

Harry found himself spinning around, gazing at doorways labeled DMGS, DIMC, DRCMC, DMT. Dumbledore and Moody went on explaining the various abbreviations were Department of Magical Games and Sports (Harry thought he saw Ludo Bagman pass by the open doorway briefly), Department of International Magical Cooperation, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (he saw both Cedric Diggory’s dad and the eerie Macnair, who had almost executed Buckbeak, pass by this doorway) and Dumbledore brightly called out, “Cheers, Basil!” to the harried-looking wizard working for the Department of Magical Transportation whom Harry remembered from the Quidditch World Cup. He still looked harried, bustling by the doorway carrying a box of what looked like rubbish. Harry assumed it was actually full of Portkeys.

They also saw the doorways for the Goblin Liaison Office, the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, where Mr. Weasley and Percy worked. Harry puzzled over the strange appearance of the doorways. The people walking past them appeared suddenly, then disappeared just as suddenly, exactly the same as people on a television or cinema screen appearing and then disappearing from one side to the other. Dumbledore saw his perplexed look. “Oh, they’re not really here, Harry.”

Now Harry was *really* confused. “What?”

Dumbledore smiled. “These are portals. Walking through these doorways, you are automatically taken to the actual location of the office on the other side. The portals are all really here, but the offices are spread out over the entire London Underground system.”

“The Underground?”

“Old tube stations,” Moody growled. “The Muggle War Office used them as military offices during World War II. Most of the ones they were in had already fallen into disuse. Made good air-raid shelters, too. We were mighty tight over here in the original Ministry offices. After the war, we made a deal with the Muggle Prime Minister to take over the old Underground Offices. They can’t be accessed by Muggles anymore; you can only get to them if you can Apparate or know how to get into here from Westminster Station. Except for that damn Aldwych Station...”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes. Aldwych. That used to be where we had all the registries. Animagi, werewolves, vampires, all that sort of thing. But there have been so many film crews down in the station proper lately, we’ve had to move the registries out of there. The film producers like the station for period dramas especially. It’s very nicely preserved, looks the same as it did in 1910 or so. The registries are sharing space now with the Goblin Liaison Office, and neither Cuthbert Mockridge nor the goblins are particularly thrilled about that. But we risked all sorts of problems with werewolves and vampires bothering film crews while trying to enter through Aldwych Station--we had to allow that originally, since most of them are not witches or wizards, and so cannot Apparate, and we didn’t necessarily want them to know about Westminster and these other portals.”

“So,” Hermione said, nodding at the portals, “can they see us?”

“Oh, yes,” Dumbledore told her. “But I expect they’ve learned to tune out what they see through the portal. It is very convenient, though, to be able to walk through here to get from, say, the Department of Magical Transportation to the Improper Use of Magic Office, especially

if you're with a person being charged. Apparating is impractical at such a time. These offices tend to have a good bit of overlap; the DMT fines anyone who Apparates without a license, and usually the lack of license goes along with offenses such as Apparating in front of Muggles, a charge issued from the IUMO. As such, they often have to call in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad as well, so as to make the Muggles forget a witch or wizard suddenly appearing on their kitchen table, or what have you."

Harry remembered getting a letter from the Improper Use of Magic Office the summer before he began second year. When the witch passed by the doorway again, he instinctively ducked behind Ron, so she wouldn't see him. With his forehead scar, she would know who he was right away if she decided not to ignore the people standing in the middle of all the portals. Ron looked over his shoulder and laughed down at him.

"*What* are you doing, Harry?" He peered out from behind Ron, to check that she'd gone. He smiled feebly up at Ron, then felt himself redden. Ginny, Malfoy and Hermione were also looking at him strangely.

Two of the portals were not like the others. One did not show an office with people bustling about; it was just a black rectangle, with no sign. The other didn't look like a portal at all. It was another rounded corridor, brick all around, like the passage from which they'd emerged.

Moody saw Harry looking at the dark doorway. "Unspeakables. Department of Mysteries. They can get out, but no one else can go in. Except I've never actually seen anyone come out of there..."

Dumbledore led them down the pipe-like brick corridor, which slanted subtly downward, and after it turned a few times, Harry could no longer see the round room behind them with the office portals. There were more than a few that Dumbledore hadn't explained, but he didn't question the headmaster as they continued on their way. After a few minutes, the corridor came to an end. They were confronted with a large bronze door with "MoM" in raised, ornately intertwined pewter letters. Dumbledore said something Harry didn't catch, and the door swung toward them. They entered and found themselves in another corridor, rectilinear now rather than rounded, looking remarkably like the corridors in the dungeons at Hogwarts. They all continued to follow Dumbledore.

Upon turning a corner, they entered into what could only be called a mob. Witches and wizards Harry had never seen before suddenly surrounded the seven of them, but most of them seemed to be trying to talk to him and Malfoy. He caught snatches of questions about the trial, about Lucius Malfoy, about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (which some of them could say amazingly fast). Many of them had accents that did not sound at all British. Harry had never considered that there was a foreign wizarding press, but obviously these were some representatives. He'd also never considered foreign wizarding schools or wizarding communities outside of Britain until the Triwizard Tournament and the Quidditch World Cup.

With a sweep of his hand, Dumbledore caused the mass of reporters to fall back. They were able to pass unmolested now, and Harry catalogued in his mind how quickly and easily Dumbledore was able to do the same sort of thing Voldemort did--magic without his wand--when he wanted to. Dumbledore looked stern and unapproachable as he walked next to Harry down the corridor. The reporters must have angered him a great deal, Harry thought, for him to do that. He usually seemed to avoid making such displays.

They turned another corner and came to another large bronze door. A troll stood next to it. He wasn't a mountain troll; Harry wasn't sure what kind of troll he was, but he was about Hagrid's

height, with a troll's long arms and vacant expression. He looked very, very strong. He must have been a well-trained troll, Harry thought, for when Dumbledore nodded at him, he opened the bronze door--it looked quite heavy--and they entered.

Harry gasped. They were in the room he'd seen in the Pensieve. They were standing at the top. The tiered rows of benches dropped off before them. It reminded Harry of a square funnel, leading to the flat, open space in the center, where he saw the familiar chair with the chains where Lucius Malfoy would sit to be tried. He swallowed, looking at that chair. He did not want to see Lucius Malfoy again. He did not want to see those cruel eyes that did not reveal any emotion at all. He did not want to hear the voice that casually said, "Almost forgot that," after putting the Cruciatus Curse on his best friend. Suddenly Harry felt an almost overwhelming impulse to run, to turn and flee from this tribunal, to flee from the wizarding world in general. He remembered the American students on the train. *That's* what Dumbledore should have done, he thought. He should have left me on some doorstep in America with a note saying my name was John Smith. I could have grown up far away from here and lived as a Muggle and Voldemort would have no idea where to find me and I would have no clue what it is like to feel responsible for other people suffering and dying...

POTTER.

An ordinary life. Why did that seem so much to ask? He looked at Malfoy, who was visibly shaking as he looked at the chair. He hadn't had a choice about his life any more than Harry had. He appeared to be taking a deep breath. He looked at Moody, of all people, who actually smiled kindly at him and nodded in what was meant to be a reassuring fashion. Harry could not help but smile a little. For all that he could see so much with that eye of his, Moody noticing Malfoy's Dark Mark through his robes didn't tell the whole story. Clearly Moody was admitting he'd been wrong about Draco Malfoy.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Where is this? Really? In relation to Muggle London?"

Dumbledore pointed down at the chair in the center of the room. "Directly above that chair, about two-hundred feet or so, is the chair where the Muggle Prime Minister sits when Parliament is in session." Harry's mouth hung open in shock. Dumbledore smiled. "Actually, it may be over a few feet. But my point is, Harry, this chamber was here before this city was a little Roman settlement called Londinium. This has been here for a very long time. Come."

They stepped down the rows until they were only two levels above the flat center of the room. Dumbledore indicated that they should sit, and they did, all in a row, with the headmaster to their left and Moody to their right. Harry sat next to Dumbledore, with Hermione to his right. Next to her, Ron glanced to his right, where Ginny sat holding Malfoy's hand tightly. Then Moody leaned in and spoke to Malfoy.

"One thing I should tell you before all this starts, Malfoy," he said raspily. "My house. It's been many a year since I was in school--I finished in 1915--but I thought I should tell you what house I was in. I've caught a slew of dark wizards, and I think the reason I have is that I can think like them. Doesn't mean I act like them. But I understand how their minds work, so I'm able to be one step ahead of them. Understand what I'm saying?" Malfoy nodded.

"You were in Slytherin."

Moody nodded. "Aye. And we're the most cunning, the sneakiest, the hardest to catch lot of bastards there is. That's why I became an Auror. I always liked a challenge in school, and given that most dark wizards have come from Slytherin, I knew I'd never be bored. Most of them think of me as a traitor, of course." Malfoy drew his lips into a line; he was already dealing with

this. "But you're strong. You can beat them. If you can come up with a plan to catch your dad, you can do damn near anything, I reckon."

Malfoy nodded again, looking scared still, but now also oddly comforted. Harry remembered Marcus Flint who'd been killed by his own father for refusing to be a Death Eater; he remembered the girl with the impenetrable Scottish accent who'd had the nerve to ask him to the ceilidh. Lastly, he thought of Snape. He'd once thought of everyone who'd been in Slytherin as being completely irredeemable, and was enormously relieved that he'd been put in Gryffindor after the Sorting Hat had briefly considered him for Slytherin. Now he found himself changing his mind, willing to be open about considering the merits of being ambitious and clever.

Truthfully, he was less inclined to like Ravenclaws these days, especially considering Roger Davies and Niamh Quirke and her gossipy friends. And Barty Crouch, Jr. had also been a Ravenclaw. He saw a certain arrogance there, somehow; they projected a feeling of innate superiority that grated on him. Except for Cho--she was all right. Maybe eventually, they'd even be friends. He still felt just a bit smug about putting her together with Viktor Krum.

Moody leaned forward now and said to Dumbledore, "Who's the Inquisitor?"

"Bean's handling it."

Moody nodded and sat back again. Harry frowned. "Who?" he said to Dumbledore.

"Eustace Bean," was all the explanation Dumbledore gave.

The door behind them opened again and other witches and wizards began filling the room.

Harry watched the other spectators file in. He saw Remus Lupin enter and sit in the top row on the left. He nodded at Harry and gave him a small smile, then hid his face behind a Daily Prophet. He would not want to be recognized, Harry knew. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the kind blue eyes of Arthur Weasley. Harry stood to face him, swallowing. Percy stood next to him, and behind them were Molly Weasley and Bill and Charlie.

"Hello, Harry. Good luck," Mr. Weasley said to him. Harry couldn't speak. Just those few words were so moving to him. He kept his left hand on Harry's shoulder, then extended his right hand and Harry took it silently, with a gratitude in his eyes that he knew Mr. Weasley understood. Harry felt that he was perhaps absolved of his part in the Ginny/Draco cover-up. Percy shook his hand and then Mr. Weasley and Percy moved on to Ron and Ginny, after greeting Hermione. Bill and Charlie each also wrung Harry's hand, smiling encouragingly, before they too moved down to the others. Then he looked up into Mrs. Weasley's dark brown eyes, glittering with tears. She nodded at him, then enfolded him in a forgiving embrace, making his eyes water, finishing with a kiss on the cheek. She moved to Hermione then, doing the same, and Harry could see how much this meant to her.

Harry looked over at Draco Malfoy and saw Mr. Weasley shaking his hand grimly, without a smile. This was quite something from someone who previously would probably have preferred to put hot needles in his eyes rather than contemplate a Malfoy touching his only daughter.

Harry watched Percy, Bill and Charlie, also not smiling, quickly take Malfoy's hand. Finally, Mrs. Weasley released Ginny from a tight hug, kissing her on the cheek, and turned to Malfoy. She looked uncertainly at him, then suddenly, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, turning swiftly to join her husband and sons.

Malfoy touched his cheek briefly, then pulled his hand away with a guilty look on his face as he caught his mother's eye. She was sitting several rows lower than Remus Lupin, and was staring daggers at him. Harry saw Malfoy swallow, then put his hands in his lap and look down at them. Harry shuddered as Narcissa Malfoy then caught his eye. He remembered how the veela had

gone from being seductively beautiful women to frightening harpies, killing machines. He looked away from Mrs. Malfoy. Oddly, at that moment, he was reminded of how frightening his own mother had been during some of the episodes he and Hermione had seen in Snape's Pensieve. Why should I think of that now? he wondered.

He turned to look at Hermione. She was very pale. He knew she worried about the same thing he did; would the testimony of others reveal their physical relationship? Would they themselves have to reveal the secret? And would their testimony suffice to put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban? The door in the corner opened then, and twelve witches and wizards filed in and took their places on the right-hand side of the room, several tiers below where the Weasleys were sitting. Finally, the buzzing and chatting in the room died down and everyone seemed to be holding their breaths as the corner door opened again and Lucius Malfoy was led in by two dementors. He looked exhausted yet still defiant. He didn't look at his son. Harry shuddered from being so close to the dementors, but tried to focus, tried not to let them get to him. Lucius Malfoy was taken to the chair with the chains, which turned gold and snaked up the sides of the chair, encasing his arms and binding him there. The dementors left again, causing Harry to breath a sigh of relief.

Silence reigned in the room. Harry saw that Narcissa Malfoy did not look at her son or husband. Then Harry heard someone stepping down the levels, going toward the center of the windowless, underground chamber. He turned his head and saw a large, dark-haired, middle-aged man with a barrel chest and piercing light blue eyes under heavy brows. He wore the blackest black robes Harry had ever seen, and a matching wizard's hat which did not wobble an inch as he descended toward the prisoner.

The prisoner.

He remembered seeing Karkaroff in that same chair, bargaining for his freedom, then on the rock at Dover, bargaining for his life. Neither setting had been particularly fair. As before in Dumbledore's Pensieve, Harry saw that Lucius Malfoy had no advocate to speak for him. He remembered that Ludo Bagman had spoken for himself, and his popularity had given him his freedom. Obviously, the concept of a fair trial in the wizarding world was still mired in a millenia-old tradition of the assumption of the guilt of the accused. Perhaps it would not have done Sirius much good to have a trial, he thought. He was glad that it probably meant that Lucius Malfoy would be going to Azkaban, but he sincerely hoped that *he* was never down there in that chair, without anyone to speak on his behalf...

"Lucius Malfoy!" came the booming voice of Eustace Bean. He sounded oddly like a bartender from the East End of London--yet he was in charge here. Harry noticed Cornelius Fudge seated just behind Narcissa Malfoy. Harry remembered at the World Cup how he had spoken of Lucius Malfoy's generosity to St. Mungo's. Fudge looked nervous and unhappy all at once. Could he override Bean if he chose? Harry did not know.

"You have been brought before the Council of Magical Law to answer to multiple charges," Bean continued. "First: Illegally training your son--an underage wizard--to Apparate. Second: Taking your son to a gathering of dark wizards for the purpose of being initiated into their number. Third: At said gathering of dark wizards, allowing your son to be placed under the Cruciatus Curse. Fourth: Also at said gathering, witnessing the murder of one Igor Karkaroff, and not divulging this to the proper authorities. Fifth through ninth: Attempting to coerce other young people to become dark wizards, namely Penelope Clearwater," Harry saw Percy cover his mouth in distress, "Marcus Flint, Percy Weasley--a Ministry employee, mind you--Roger

Davies--current Head Boy at Hogwarts--and--Harry Potter.”

A gasp went up from the spectators and Harry felt dozens of eyes upon him. Bean had paused for effect, and he seemed satisfied with the crowd’s reaction. A born showman, Harry thought. He looked sideways at Dumbledore, who nodded almost imperceptibly and then turned to glare around the room. The noise dissolved.

“Charges Ten through fifteen: conspiracy to commit murder. You ordered the murders of Penelope Clearwater’s parents, Beryl and Reginald Clearwater, her grandfather, Wilmer Clearwater, and--her ten-year-old brother, Jeremy Clearwater.” Another reaction from the crowd, which Bean ignored. “You also ordered the murders of Aurelia Flint and Letitia Carpenter.” Harry assumed Aurelia Flint was Marcus Flint’s mother, and the Carpenter woman must have been the houseguest at the Flints’ that Sirius had mentioned.

“Charges Sixteen through nineteen,” Bean continued, “You placed three young girls, students at Hogwarts, under the Imperius Curse, namely Kathryn Bell and Cho Chang--both prefects--and Alicia Spinnet--current Head Girl. You also used a dangerous potion that acts like Imperius on Hogwarts prefect Hermione Granger.

“Charges Twenty through Twenty-two,” Bean said. “Kidnapping and detaining Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter against their will. And lastly, Charge Twenty-three: Placing the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley, son of Ministry employee Arthur Weasley.”

Bean walked near Malfoy and peered briefly into his face before straightening up again. “Lucius Malfoy! You have heard the *twenty-three* charges against you. What say you to these charges?”

Harry looked at Lucius Malfoy, and was startled to see him looking back, directly at him. “I say, I know something you don’t know,” he said softly.

“What’s that?” Bean said loudly. Now Malfoy looked at Bean.

“I know some things you don’t know. Quite a few things.” He looked at Harry again, and his mouth began to twist in a very wicked fashion. Harry swallowed. He was getting a very bad feeling about this.

Bean saw what Malfoy was trying to do, how he was trying to shake him up. He looked at Malfoy shrewdly and said. “I’m sure you will have the opportunity to tell us many things as we go through the charges one by one. The first four charges involve your son, so I will ask him to elucidate for us. You may respond when he is done if you feel he has been in any way inaccurate.” He turned to the row where they were sitting. “Draco Malfoy! Please stand.” He swallowed and stood, and Harry remembered how composed he was most of the time when he was in the circle at Dover. *That’s right, just stand there like you have ice water in your veins. Don’t let that old bastard who fathered you get the upper hand...*

“Draco Malfoy!” Bean said again. “The first charge against your father is that of teaching you to Apparate. When did this begin?”

He lifted his chin and looked at the Inquisitor. “Right after I returned home from school last June.”

“Were you aware of the fact that your father was breaking the law by doing this?”

He paused for a moment before saying levelly, “Yes.”

“Why then did you comply?”

Draco Malfoy looked down, then at Ginny next to him, who gave a small nod. He looked up at Bean again. “I complied because I had to. I always had to do whatever he said.”

Bean nodded and paced slowly in front of Lucius Malfoy's chair. "Yes, yes, you were an obedient son..."

"No. That's not it."

Bean looked up at him. "It's not? You didn't just go along with everything your father asked of you to be a good, obedient son? Obedience for its own sake?"

He shook his head. "There would have been--consequences, should I have chosen to defy him."

Bean looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Consequences, you say. Punishment of some kind? Loss of privileges? Going to bed with no tea?" Bean sounded glib.

"Torture."

A low murmur rumbled through the room, and Lucius Malfoy began to glare at his son, as did Narcissa Malfoy. He was airing the dirty laundry in public.

"Torture, you say. What sort of torture?"

"He would put the Passus Curse on me."

"The Passus Curse? Is that all? It is painful, of course, but it is brief. Is that how he tortured you, coerced you to do things you knew to be illegal?"

"It is brief if the person casting the spell wishes it to be. If it is repeated...well, I still bear the marks."

Bean looked slightly uncomfortable now. "Er, where are these--marks?"

"My arms."

Bean looked relieved. "Would you mind showing the jury these--marks?"

He paused for a moment, then began to move. He unbuttoned his robes to his waist, then slid them off his shoulders; he unbuttoned his shirt to the waist and then drew the fine linen fabric off his shoulders, revealing his pale chest, but more importantly, his bruised upper arms. He kept his forearms covered. The bruises were purplish-green and numerous on both arms. After the jury had had a chance to see this, he pulled his shirt on again, buttoning it properly once more, then replacing his robes and buttoning those as well. He continued to hold his head high, and Harry thought that perhaps this wasn't going so badly after all. It certainly couldn't look good for Lucius Malfoy to be torturing his own son to coerce him to do illegal things. Draco Malfoy was underage--surely he wouldn't be blamed.

Bean prepared to go on. "The second charge--"

"That's not all," Draco Malfoy interrupted him, still standing. Bean looked startled, then malevolent. Harry made a mental note not to interrupt him while being questioned. Then he remembered that Draco Malfoy had interrupted Voldemort himself during his initiation. He certainly had nerve, Harry thought.

"That's not all," Bean echoed, almost without inflection.

"If I really displeased him, he put the Hara Kiri curse on me."

"I am not familiar with that curse. What is it?"

Draco Malfoy sighed. "Something my father discovered while traveling. It comes from Japan. In that country, it is the ritual of suicide that is performed--or was, rather, since it's been illegal for some time--when a person was in disgrace. The only honorable thing to do was to kill yourself, in a very specific way. You were supposed to use a special knife made just for the purpose. You used the knife to ritually disembowel yourself. When the Hara Kiri curse is placed on someone, they believe that they are performing this ritual suicide on themselves, and feel all of the pain and see all of the blood as if they really were doing it. It's an Unforgivable Curse in

Japan. You can be executed for using it on a human being. They do not use dementors. But there are no laws against it here.”

A loud buzz erupted as the spectators considered what kind of father would put such a curse on his own son. Bean had a gleam in his eye and one corner of his mouth curled up. “So,” he said. “You had ample reason for also acceding to your father in his wish to have you initiated into a group of dark wizards. The second charge. And the third charge: being complicit in the Cruciatus Curse being placed on another person, namely you, Draco Malfoy. And witnessing the murder of Igor Karkaroff—which you also did not divulge,” Bean said to Draco Malfoy, “but we have heard and seen evidence about why you did not.”

He stood straight and tall, his platinum hair almost blending in with his pale skin, and spoke again. “It was not just any group of dark wizards, sir.”

Bean looked up at him, frowning. “How do you mean?”

Draco turned and looked at Harry, who nodded grimly at him. He turned back to Bean. “They were Death Eaters summoned by--Voldemort.”

Now the noise rumbling through the room had gotten completely out of hand, and Harry was impressed. He’d never heard Draco Malfoy say the name before, he’d only called him the Dark Lord. Bean looked darkly at him, while Fudge stood and tried to quiet the crowd, but they ignored him and the noise continued. Finally, Dumbledore stood and shot silver sparks into the air with his wand, and used the commanding voice Harry had only heard from him a few times. “Silence! Do you want to hear the truth or not?”

The chamber grew quiet. Dumbledore remained standing, as did Fudge, who was glaring back at the headmaster. “We are here for the truth, yes!” the bowler-hatted wizard declared. “Not fairy tales about You-Know-Who returning!”

Eustace Bean nodded. “Yes, Minister, I quite agree. Master Malfoy, please remember...”

“He’s telling the truth!” Harry had been unable to stop himself. He was on his feet now, trying to steady his breathing. Every eye was on him, and Bean looked astonished. Harry swallowed, then looked at Draco Malfoy, who glanced at him briefly, but did not look as though the outburst were unwelcome.

“And you would know this because--?” Bean prompted him.

“I was there almost one year ago when Voldemort got his body back. He used my blood to do it.”

The pandemonium in the chamber was deafening. Bean tried crying out, “I will clear the room!” but it had no effect. Harry looked defiantly at Fudge, who was purple with rage. He had been contradicted by Harry Potter. He had no doubt as to whom the wizarding world would believe. Fudge sat again, as did Dumbledore.

When the noise had finally died away, Lucius Malfoy looked up at Eustace Bean and said evenly, “I told you there were things you don’t know.” He had a nasty smile on his face and looked up at Harry, who slowly sat next to Dumbledore again. Once more, the only people standing were Draco Malfoy and the Inquisitor.

“Let us return to the second charge, and let us also hope that not all of the charges take so long to explore. You say that this particular gathering of dark wizards was summoned by the Dark Lord?”

“Yes.”

“When was it?”

“Christmas night, last year. My father and I Apparated to a spot on the cliffs at Dover where all

of the Death Eaters were being summoned. Voldemort was there, with his snake and Wormtail.”

“Who is this ‘Wormtail’?”

He turned and looked at Harry again. “I think Potter should tell you about him. I don’t really know much about him except that he’s the Death Eater who took care of Voldemort until he got his body back.”

“Continue.”

And he told the hushed assembly of the appearance of Karkaroff, of Voldemort questioning him. There threatened to be a riot again at the mention of Voldemort having an heir, but this time Bean’s angry gaze was enough to quell the murmurs, and Draco Malfoy was able to continue his recitation. He told of having the Cruciatus Curse put on him, of receiving the Dark Mark, which Bean asked him to display to the jury. Tentatively, he pushed up the sleeve of his robes, then unbuttoned his shirt cuff and pushed that out of the way as well. Harry watched the faces of the jury members; some were impassive, others merely looking as though they wished to appear so. Several were openly horrified, covering their mouths. Harry also watched the Weasleys. Mrs. Weasley held her handkerchief over her mouth and her eyes shone wetly as she turned to look at her husband, who seemed very grim. They knew now; they knew what it meant to be Lucius Malfoy’s son.

He covered his arm again and continued, explaining that he did not wish to break the law by using the Cruciatus Curse himself on Karkaroff, so he had volunteered to use the Hara Kiri, although knowing how painful it was. He then described Snape’s arrival--and Harry was glad that he had not told him that it was Snape, so he could not reveal that now--and the attempted flight which resulted in Wormtail alerting Voldemort, and Voldemort killing Karkaroff.

Bean thanked him and bade him sit. They were only through the first four charges. He turned to the prisoner and asked him whether anything his son had said was untrue. He looked into his son’s eyes and said, “No. Every word is true.”

Bean looked shaken, as though he were wondering what Malfoy was playing at. “You do not wish to refute anything?”

Malfoy looked up at the Inquisitor now. “I do not.”

He cleared his throat. “Very well. We shall move on to the next charges. Attempting to coerce various witches and wizards to join the Death Eaters. Penelope Clearwater! Did you attempt to recruit her?”

He smiled at Bean. “You have her suicide note, do you not? Doesn’t it say?”

Bean looked uncomfortable. “No. It does not. It’s, er, actually--” He turned and caught Percy’s eye, and Harry noticed that Percy was turning as red as his hair. “It was addressed to Percy Weasley.”

Bean nodded at Percy. “Please stand. You are Percy Weasley?”

Percy’s color had returned to normal again. He held himself erect. “Yes, sir.”

“And you were given this note after Miss Clearwater’s body was discovered?”

Percy’s eyes looked wet behind his glasses. “Yes,” he answered, his voice catching.

“What did the note say?”

Percy looked around the chamber, coloring once more. “It, er, said some rather personal things...”

Bean smiled indulgently. “How old are you, Mr. Weasley?”

“Twenty.”

“As was Miss Clearwater, I understand. I think we can assume some of the--rather personal things. You may leave those out. Was there anything in the note which was not--rather personal?”

Percy nodded. “She said she would never do as they wished. She said they wanted to use her to get to me, to get me to be a Death Eater, too. She said she didn’t know what else to do, and she thought that by killing herself, she at least might protect her family, if not me as well. But--but--it didn’t work...” Percy was crying openly now, tears flowing freely down his face, and Harry saw that he hadn’t shaved that morning; he had a faint orange fuzz on his cheeks that was now damp with his tears. Harry turned to Hermione, whose eyes were also glistening. He fought the urge to put his arm around her and hold her tightly.

“If I may,” Lucius Malfoy said to Bean, with a casual tone that reminded Harry of his comment after cursing Ron. “I had no idea that Miss Clearwater had killed herself, I only knew that she did not report as ordered. As such, the plans were already in place to eliminate her family.”

The hubbub in the room grew again at the offhanded way he spoke of the Clearwaters. Bean managed to silence the crowd with a wave of his hand this time. “So you admit that you ordered the murders of Beryl, Reginald, Wilmer and Jeremy Clearwater?”

He smiled. “Of course. We couldn’t have any other recruits think *suicide* was a way out, could we? They had to know that even though they were dead, we would still take retribution on their families.”

Bean was looking angry now at the way Lucius Malfoy appeared to be so glib about his situation. “Who actually carried out the murders?”

“Well, I thought about just not telling you, but they were so incompetent about the pub in Hogsmeade, I don’t think they’ll be any great loss to the Dark Lord. Avery and Nott.”

Bean furrowed his brow. “They were given suspended sentences and fined for the Three Broomsticks explosion and forced to pay the publican retribution.”

“Yes, and after that I gave them work that wouldn’t involve them being anywhere near that ex-Auror with the magical eye,” he snarled, looking up at Moody, who glared back. “They proved much more competent. I didn’t anticipate the trouble with the Flints, unfortunately. Titus Flint was already a Death Eater, I assumed his son would come into the fold as a matter of course. But he was so Quidditch-obsessed, he wanted no part of it. I understand there are witnesses to his dad’s killing him? I certainly didn’t tell Titus to do that.”

“What about Aurelia Flint, and their houseguest, Letitia Carpenter?”

“Avery and Nott again. They didn’t know which was which, who was the mother and who was the houseguest, so they just killed them both. Easier that way.”

Bean looked at Malfoy suspiciously again. Harry wondered what was going on. Why was he giving up Avery and Nott? Why was he so easily admitting his involvement? Why wasn’t he denying anything? Bean asked him about sending recruitment letters to Percy and Roger, and he freely admitted this, saying that the Dark Lord had a bit of a weakness for Head Boys. He liked their drive and ambition. Percy looked embarrassed by this--he liked to think these were good qualities, and here he was being coveted by Voldemort because of them. He also confirmed that they were no longer potential candidates; too much publicity. Then Bean mentioned recruiting Harry.

“Yes, well, that one’s obvious, isn’t it?” he said cheerfully.

“Obvious?” Bean said, as though it were no such thing.

“Certainly. The triumph of the Dark Lord having Harry Potter for his servant...what could be

more satisfying for him?" He didn't mention what Dumbledore had, Voldemort's needing Harry alive to draw on his power. Perhaps he didn't know of this motivation.

"So," Bean said again, full-voiced. "You do not deny any of these charges either?"

Malfoy smiled again. "Not a one."

"Moving on!" he cried. "Charges Ten through fifteen: conspiracy to commit murder. You have already admitted ordering the murders of the Clearwaters and Mrs. Flint and Miss Carpenter. Are you expecting leniency for giving up the names of the murderers? Because I should remind you that you are also charged with numerous counts of using Unforgivable Curses on human beings."

"If you like," was all Malfoy said. Harry was genuinely puzzled. Why was he so cheerful and unconcerned about spending the rest of his life in Azkaban? He caught his son's eye and furrowed his brow in a silent question. Sitting between Ginny and Moody, he raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He was as baffled as Harry.

They both turned their attention back to Bean.

"Charges Sixteen through nineteen," Bean continued, "Placing those three girls under the Imperius Curse and using a potion that acts like Imperius on another girl. Once these girls were all in your power, what did you order them to do?"

"To pursue Harry Potter romantically." Another buzz, and Harry felt himself redden. "Although my son informed me--and I think for once he wasn't lying--that I needn't have bothered as Potter seems to have become Mr. Popularity at Hogwarts. But you have been misled; although I ordered it, I didn't personally put the girls under Imperius or administer the potion to Miss Granger. Avery and Nott did those things. I only reinforced the Imperius on Miss Chang at the Quidditch match at Hogwarts. So I humbly request that the charges against me of using the Imperius Curse be reduced to that one instance."

Bean nodded at a wizard Harry hadn't noticed before, sitting on the bottom tier, rapidly taking notes. This wizard nodded back at Bean and went on scribbling. Harry didn't feel he would be likely to stop being beet-red anytime soon. "What," Bean continued, "was the purpose of ordering the girls to do this?"

"To guarantee that he would have a girlfriend. He doesn't think anything of that Muggle family of his; we needed for there to be someone he would really care about if it became necessary to--*persuade* him of the wisdom of serving the Dark Lord. He had best friends, it's true, but one of them is now--quite a bit more than a friend..."

Hermione was shaking, reaching out her hands blindly; Ron took one and Harry the other, squeezing so that she could absorb their strength. She looked at each of them in turn, grateful, while Harry was aware of the scratching quills of the reporters in the chamber. He had no idea what to expect from them; he almost found himself missing Rita's articles for their predictably outrageous statements. Predictability was something. He wished he could see Hermione's face as she looked at Ron; over her head, he could see Ron's expression as he gazed at her. He looked as he had when she had thrown her arms around him after Harry and Malfoy had pulled him from under the debris at the Three Broomsticks. Then he met Harry's eye, and Harry remembered the conversation he and Ron had had about Hermione without saying her name. Ron had not been ready to risk his friendship with her, he'd said. Was he ready now? Harry wondered. And there was the way he and Parvati had parted ways...

"Whether it worked is not pertinent to this inquiry, Mr. Malfoy," Bean informed him, shutting down that avenue of exploration, much to Harry's relief. "And whether you used the Imperius

Curse once, twice or twenty times is also irrelevant.

“Charges Twenty through Twenty-two,” Bean continued. “Kidnapping and detaining three people against their will. And, charge twenty-three, placing the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley. Do you have any answer to these charges?”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “Now that I think of it, you may have to add two more. I mean, once we had them there, we were also considering recruiting young Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that.”

Harry didn’t get a good feeling from the way Malfoy was behaving. Volunteering that there were charges to be added? What sane prisoner would ever do such a thing? Plus, he’d already given up Avery and Nott for the six murders and using Imperius, and he’d revealed that Titus Flint was not just a murderer on the run, but a Death Eater who was trying to coerce his son to join also—as Lucius Malfoy had done with his son. Harry was beginning to regret having left Sandy at Hogwarts. He had thought that it wouldn’t be good for anyone to hear her hissing under his robes, and he didn’t want his being a Parselmouth to come up, but now he was wishing he had some way to glimpse into the future, so he could tell what Lucius Malfoy was up to.

“So,” Bean said, “When you say ‘we had them there,’ you mean you and your son.”

“And Wormtail.”

“Ah. There is that name again.”

He looked at Harry. “Ask Harry Potter.” Bean looked at Harry again; Draco Malfoy had said as much. Then Lucius Malfoy looked around the room and his eyes lit on Lupin. Oh no, thought Harry. “You can ask him, too. The werewolf they had teaching our children at Hogwarts two years ago.”

Lupin drew his lips into a line and caught Harry’s eye. *Sorry*, Harry said silently to him. If there were people in the wizarding world who didn’t know Remus Lupin was a werewolf, they would know now. Bean looked up at him, considering the matter. “I may do just that. But right now I am more interested in the final charge. Lucius Malfoy, you placed the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley. That brings the number of unforgivable curses you cast to two. Do you have anything to say? Do you deny that you put this curse on him?”

Malfoy smiled unevenly. “Why don’t you ask him? Or better still—why don’t you ask him whether *he* put the Cruciatus Curse on his best friend, Harry Potter?”

The buzz started yet again. So that was Malfoy’s game, Harry thought. Get Ron strung up as well. He knew he was stuck, they had too much on him; so he was trying to take Ron down too, and maybe Harry and Lupin if it came out that they were protecting Sirius. Which would also put Dumbledore and Snape in danger. Then he remembered that the Weasleys also knew about Sirius, and Hermione knew, and the other operatives; Dumbledore’s entire covert operation could come crashing down. Did Lucius Malfoy know about Sirius? he wondered. Harry tried to remember whether he was in the crowd in Hogsmeade when Madam Rosmerta noticed Sirius after his Polyjuice Potion had worn off; worse still, had he seen the fleeing black dog and connected it to Sirius? Did he know that Sirius was an unregistered Animagus? And how could Harry and Ron and the rest of them avoid revealing all that without lying to the Inquisitor?

Ron looked at Harry and Hermione uncertainly, then down at Bean. “Very well,” Bean said. “Ronald Weasley! Please stand.”

Ron stood slowly, and Bean looked momentarily alarmed at how tall he was. He’d trimmed his

beard neatly for the tribunal, but he still looked a bit young and frightened, despite his size and the facial hair.

“You are Ronald Weasley, son of Ministry employee Arthur Weasley?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please tell us what happened during the time leading up to Lucius Malfoy putting the Cruciatus Curse on you.”

Ron was shaking. “Well,” he began with a waver in his voice. “I had been tied to a tree, but Draco Malfoy convinced his dad to untie me. Before that, he pretended to tell me to put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry, and I pretended to do so as a distraction, so he could stun his dad.” Lucius Malfoy stopped being impassive now. He was livid; he screwed up his face and screamed at Ron, “You didn’t fake that, Weasley! You couldn’t have, not after I cursed you, and you’d heard about *them*,” he said, gesturing with his head at Harry and Hermione. “You put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry Potter!”

Ron breathed through his nostrils, his chest heaving as though he’d gone running with Harry and Hermione for the first time all over again. Harry could see how nervous he was.

“Ronald Weasley!” bellowed the Inquisitor, suddenly looking at Ron quite menacingly. The Weasleys looked terrified; they hadn’t known about this. “Did you or did you not put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry Potter?”

Ron bit his lip; when he spoke, his voice shook. “I—I wanted Mr. Malfoy to think so...” Still technically a truthful response, if not a yes-no one. Harry stood quickly.

“Sir,” he said as respectfully as he could, considering he was speaking out of turn. “May I?” Bean surveyed him for a few moments, then nodded. “I heard him say the curse, and he pointed the wand at me, but—I felt no pain. No pain at all. I didn’t feel a thing.” He was also telling the truth, technically. Lucius Malfoy looked hysterical now, struggling with his bonds as though he wanted to run up into the seats and throttle Harry personally.

“I tell you, he *did!*” he said repeatedly. Bean observed him with a detached expression, almost pity, but not quite. After he had ranted for a bit, he put a stop to it.

“Enough! If any charges are to be brought against Ronald Weasley, that is for another time. Further, it seems that an investigation into this Wormtail person is also in order, but also at another time. Do you have any further response to the charges against *you*, Lucius Malfoy?” Malfoy glared at Harry. “No, I do not,” he said with his eyes full of hate.

“Very well. I now ask the jury,” Bean proclaimed, “to raise their hands for conviction and a life sentence in Azkaban.” Everyone looked expectantly at the jurors. Not a single hand was raised. Bean was starting to turn purple. “All who vote for acquittal, raise your hands.” Still not a single movement from the jurors except to look down. Bean strode over to them. “May I remind you that you are here to serve the cause of justice! What say you?”

“What about justice for *us*?” a young wizard on the jury asked, then reddened and looked down again.

A witch burst out, “If You-Know-Who is back, do you think he won’t be able to find those of us who were on this jury? We didn’t know about that when we agreed to do this!”

An older witch stood uncertainly and said, “With all due respect, Mr. Bean, would it be possible for us to—discuss the verdict and sentence in private, and to give an anonymous vote?” She looked uncertainly at her fellow jurors, since they hadn’t talked about this. Some of them nodded to her, others still looked uncertain. Harry remembered that in Dumbledore’s Pensieve, the verdicts were given quite promptly after the testimony, by a show of hands, no anonymity.

But all of those trials were held after the fall of Voldemort.

Bean reluctantly nodded to the witch, then went to the door in the corner and knocked twice. The dementors who had escorted Malfoy into the room went to the chair. The chains released him, and they lifted him to a standing position, escorting him out again. Harry watched through narrowed eyes; somehow, he felt looking at the dementors this way might prevent them from having any effect on him. When they were gone, the members of the jury rose and filed out. The chamber seemed to be in some disarray; everyone had expected to get the verdict immediately. This was an unexpected development. The rest of the crowd starting moving about now, and Harry saw Dumbledore giving an angry glare to some reporters who started to approach them. Then Harry turned and saw Eustace Bean approaching them.

“Albus. May I speak to you privately? Perhaps Alastor can escort your students to the commissary for some tea.”

Dumbledore nodded at him. “Of course. I had hoped to speak to you as well. May I bring someone else along?”

Bean nodded and Dumbledore gestured to Lupin to descend the rows of seats to join them. When he was standing next to them, Dumbledore said, “Eustace Bean, may I introduce to you Remus Lupin? Remus will be our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor in September. I’m afraid we cannot impose upon Alastor any longer.”

Harry felt this was the first bit of good news he’d had all day. He grinned at Lupin. “Really? You’re coming back?”

Lupin smiled at him. “It’s all set. The board of governors practically begged me.” Harry turned to Hermione and Ron, who also looked thrilled. Ginny wasn’t paying attention; she was gazing with concern at Draco Malfoy, who stared at the chair where his father had been. Lupin made his way through to them.

“Hello again, Draco,” he said to him. Why did I think they wouldn’t know each other? Harry thought stupidly. He taught all of us two years ago; of course he knew Draco Malfoy.

“Hello, Professor,” he said automatically. Lupin smiled.

“Not ‘Professor’ again yet. In September,” he said. Then he looked at him soberly. “You showed great courage today, Draco.”

He looked down at Lupin; Harry was startled to realize that he too was taller than Lupin now, who was only of medium height. “Thank you,” he said softly. Lupin nodded to him. He didn’t seem to expect any long conversations. Dumbledore and Lupin walked off with Bean, and Moody clapped a hand on Draco Malfoy’s shoulder.

“Come on. Let’s all see if there’s anything edible at the commissary. If there is, we can all mark this day on the calendar and celebrate it in future years as a holiday.” He smiled that unnatural smile of his and then they were all laughing, even Malfoy, as they went back up the serried rows to the door where they’d entered. Harry checked his watch; it was one-thirty. The trial had taken two-and-a-half hours. Harry didn’t know whether that was short or long. Probably short, since Malfoy hadn’t really argued with any of the charges except the Imperius, and he’d still admitted to putting it on Cho Chang, and he himself added the charges of trying to recruit Hermione and Ron to be Death Eaters. On the other hand, it also didn’t seem that it should have taken that long for everything that was said to be said. Then he remembered all of the instances when the chamber had erupted in noise, and the time that Malfoy had spent undressing to reveal first his bruises, then his Mark.

Thankfully, Ginny and Hermione hadn’t been asked to testify. He’d been terrified; and now

there might be an inquiry about Wormtail, and thus, about Sirius. Perhaps Dumbledore could convince Bean to drop that for now, he hoped.

When they emerged into the corridor, the reporters were there again, asking questions, taking photographs. Moody looked at them with his magical eye and they fell back, repulsed by his strange appearance. He was leading the five of them back toward the bronze door, when they came face to face suddenly with Narcissa Malfoy.

She glared at her son with eyes full of hate. Then suddenly she slapped him across the face. "That's for disgracing the family." she said icily. "That's for throwing away everything your father and I have ever done for you, for telling us how stupid we were for saving your life when you could have been killed as a baby."

He stared at her in surprise. Then he woke up and glared at her just as angrily. "Saving my life? Screwing up my life is more like it. At least Potter's parents showed they loved him; they decided they'd rather die than let him serve that scum you and father call a lord. They loved him enough to give their lives for him!" Harry had never heard before exactly what it was that Draco Malfoy envied most about him--now he knew.

"No, I *didn't* die for you! I *lived* for you! And your father did, too! But do you appreciate it? No, you're an ungrateful little whelp who deserves everything you're going to get!" And she spat at his face suddenly, shocking them all, especially Draco. He put his hand to his cheek, disbelief in his eyes. He stared at her speechlessly.

"I should tell you," she said icily. "That regardless of the verdict and sentence, you'd better speak to that excuse for a headmaster about where you will spend your summer holiday, and your future Christmas and Easter holidays, because it certainly won't be at Malfoy Manor. You are never to darken our doorstep again. You are no longer our son. You are dead to us. You will also have to make some other arrangements for paying your tuition and school supplies. You will never see another Knut from us. You have completely disgraced the Malfoy name. You are no longer a Malfoy!" As she spoke, her hair flew loose from its carefully constructed upsweep and her face grew red. Harry thought of veelas again. "And as far as the Hara Kiri curse--it's a pity this isn't Japan. Then perhaps you would do the right thing after bringing such disgrace on your family and actually commit Hara Kiri!"

He opened his mouth to speak, but he had no words. He watched her turn and march down the corridor away from him. Then he turned to Ginny, who uttered an inarticulate cry and threw her arms around him; he put his cheek on her blazing hair, eyes shining, a shocked look still on his face.

They all stood awkwardly in the corridor, unsure what to do after the dreadful display from Mrs. Malfoy, but when Moody spotted some reporters coming their way, he moved them along again to the large bronze door, and thence to the circular room with the portals. Moody directed them to a doorway which Harry had noticed before had a number of long tables with benches, similar to the house tables in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but a bit smaller, only seating about ten people each. After going through the portal, they selected a table. Other tables were populated by Ministry employees who were just finishing their lunches and preparing to return to their offices. Harry looked around; he didn't see anyplace to line up with a tray to get food.

There were just tables and benches in the large underground room--which could be anywhere in the city of London, he realized after a second, depending on the location of the abandoned tube station they had converted into the commissary. He looked uncertainly at Moody, who grabbed a plate from a stack on the table. Looking down at it, Moody muttered, "Corned beef and

cabbage, boiled potatoes and a stout.” The requested food appeared on his plate, and a pint of stout next to it. So Ron took a plate from the stack as well.

“Bubble and squeak,” he said experimentally, “and pumpkin juice.”

The food appeared. The other students also procured plates and placed their orders. It took Harry a while to decide what he felt like eating. Oddly enough, the first thing that came to mind was something he’d only ever had at Mrs. Figg’s. For all that her house smelled of cabbage (and more than a little like cats) the food she’d served him had been good, and certainly in more generous portions than the Dursleys. “Moussaka,” he said clearly, hoping the house elves or whoever was taking the orders knew what this was. “And flatbread and lemonade.” In a matter of moments, the food had appeared, looking just as Harry had remembered it the last time he’d been at Mrs. Figg’s, years before (although, as Moody had warned, the food wasn’t as good as Mrs. Figg’s—it was slightly bland). Ginny was having some shrimp dish that smelled garlicky (luckily, Snape wasn’t present), and Hermione had chosen (without a thought to the invisible servers, he noticed) a serving of paella.

Only Draco Malfoy had no food in front of him and did not look as though he wanted any. He still looked in shock. Ginny tried to get him to try some of her lunch, and Ron did the same, but he shook his head dumbly, a vacant look in his eyes. He wasn’t truly with them, Harry thought. This was a price he hadn’t expected to pay. He was suddenly disowned, cut off, destitute and alone. For someone who had led the kind of privileged existence Draco had, this would be an utter shock to the system. Harry felt confident that Dumbledore would find some way to sort things out for him, and he probably would not care at all about the tuition, but, having had no family really, for most of his life, Harry could not begin to imagine what it would be like to have one, and then have it snatched away because he had done the right and just thing.

By the time they were done eating, it was two-thirty. They didn’t get up. Dumbledore and Lupin came through the portal and joined them at their table after putting a hand briefly on Draco Malfoy’s shoulder. Harry remembered him doing the same with the young Snape, when Sirius had given him the goblet of blood. Harry again felt the same concern about making sure that Draco stayed on the right side, that he didn’t slip back into what was easy and familiar.

“We’ve spoken to Bean about Wormtail. He knows that he is a dark wizard who is also an unregistered Animagus, taking the form of a rat. He knows that he helped Voldemort regain his body and that he put the Cruciatus Curse on Draco here.” He squeezed Malfoy’s shoulder again. “He knows nothing yet about--Snuffles. And for now, it will stay that way.” Harry noticed that Malfoy had a perplexed look on his face. How much could they tell him? he wondered. How trustworthy was he now, really?

“He also knows that Wormtail has a distinctive silver hand, and in his rat form, a silver paw. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be on the lookout for him. That is the best we can do for now...”

“Professor?” Harry said suddenly.

“Yes, Harry?”

“The silver hand—it seems to have changed him. He’s different now. More confident.”

Dumbledore nodded. “It is a very powerful magical object that Voldemort has bestowed upon him, and it is part of his body. And as it is silver...” he turned and looked at Lupin, and Harry understood. He in particular had to be very careful if ever he encountered his old friend Pettigrew. Silver was fatal to werewolves. But apparently Dumbledore decided that they had explored this topic for long enough.

“The jury isn’t back yet,” Dumbledore told them all. “We all need to find a way to occupy ourselves while we wait.” The Weasleys had come into the commissary not long after they had commenced eating, and Mr. Weasley stood now and approached their table.

“Well,” he said, trying to sound cheerful. “I could give everyone a long-overdue tour of my office.”

Ginny looked very excited about this, as did Hermione. Ron was less excited, but Ginny was pulling on his arm, reminding him for how long they’d wanted to see where their father worked. She tried to pull on Malfoy’s arm too, but he shook his head, looking glum. Harry actually might have liked to see the office, but he begged off too. He didn’t want Malfoy to be alone. He thought of Penelope Clearwater, thinking there was no way out but suicide. He had never thought of Draco Malfoy as someone who could be suicidal (homicidal, yes), but now he decided there was a definite danger, and it made him nervous. For one thing, there was Ginny; Harry hated to think of how she would react if Malfoy killed himself. He thought he had nothing left to live for; Harry had to remind him that he had Ginny.

The others left for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and only Malfoy and Harry were left in the commissary. Suddenly, Malfoy rose and took off his robes, folding them up hastily and cramming them into his bag after taking his wand and inserting it in a special pocket along the outside of his right thigh. Harry watched him go, then picked up his own bag and followed. He emerged into the circular room, but there was no sign of Malfoy. Then Harry listened; he heard footsteps echoing down the curving corridor they’d taken to come here from the station platform. Oh no, thought Harry. He’s going to the station.

He ran down the corridor, and then he started to hear the footsteps before him running, not walking away from him. He sped up and finally found Malfoy staring at the solid wall in which Dumbledore had opened an archway with his wand. Try as he might, Malfoy couldn’t seem to get it to open. He struck his wand on the bricks repeatedly, looking for the spot that would let him out. He looked over his shoulder, seeing Harry, and decided to ignore him, continuing to bash his wand on the wall, until Harry thought he would snap it. *He* had already snapped.

Harry moved to stand next to him, then grabbed his wrist and gently took his wand from his hand. Malfoy stared at him as though he were a stranger, his wrist still in Harry’s hand. Harry pocketed Malfoy’s wand.

“You don’t want to do it, you know.”

“Do what?”

Harry stared at him intently, waiting to answer. “Throw yourself in front of the train,” he finally said.

Malfoy looked alarmed, as though Harry had read his mind. “How did you--”

“Because that’s the first thing I’d think of, if I were you. I wouldn’t think of the obvious thing.”

“What obvious thing? There’s a better way to kill myself down here? Besides getting you hacked off enough that you might do it for me?”

“No. I mean the obvious reason why you shouldn’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Ginny.”

The moment Harry said the name, Malfoy’s face crumpled, and he nodded, then leaned against the unyielding wall and slumped down to his haunches, hiding his face in his hands. If he was crying, he was doing it silently. Harry wondered how young he was when he had learned to do that, to cry so silently that his father wouldn’t hear, so no one would suspect what he was doing.

He remembered the years in his cupboard under the stairs...Harry also leaned against the wall, slowly sliding down to a sitting position. He stared into space, his legs stretched out in front of him, waiting.

After what seemed a very long time, Malfoy lifted his face. He sat down on the floor like Harry now, his legs stretched in front of him, and sighed. He sounded very tired. They sat like that for a while, not talking. Finally Malfoy said, "Potter."

"Yeah Malfoy?" Silence. "Well, Malfoy?"

"You can't call me that."

"What? That's what I always call you."

"I know, but I shouldn't use that name any more. I'm no longer a Malfoy, remember?"

"What are you going to do, go by just one name, like Sting?"

"Who?"

"Nevermind. So I'm supposed to call you Draco now?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so. You still call me Potter."

"All right." He took a deep breath and forced out the word: "Harry. There. I said it."

Harry made a face. "Don't do that. This isn't going to work. As far as I'm concerned, you're still Malfoy."

He actually smiled a little. "And I suppose I'd better keep calling you Potter."

"So we actually agree on something."

"A miracle." They each had a small smile. They were quiet again for a little while, but it was a more companionable silence this time. Then Malfoy spoke again. "So, Potter. What do you do with those Muggles of yours all summer?"

"Last summer I relandscaped the garden for five pounds a day."

"Oh, right. The manual labor."

"It was good exercise. And I actually had some spending money for once."

Malfoy was silent again for a time before he spoke. "How much is five pounds a day in Galleons?"

"I don't know. Probably not very much. It's not even very much in Muggle money. That's why I knew my aunt would agree to pay me that. It's so little it's laughable--but it's better than nothing."

"How do you pay for your Hogwarts stuff, then?"

"I have an account at Gringott's. My parents left me some money." Harry felt a little uncomfortable discussing this with him, now that he had nothing. It was even worse than with Ron.

"Well, you could change some of your Galleons into Muggle money, you know. The Goblins don't mind. In fact, they love it. It's the chief way they make money, after all. First, they set the exchange rates so that they're favorable to them *always*, then they also charge a transaction fee on every exchange--a percentage, naturally, rather than a flat fee. Since plenty of wizards and witches need to buy things in the Muggle world, they really clean up. And their loan policies are even worse. I can personally tell you of several pureblood families who think nothing of converting large amounts of gold to Muggle money just so they can put it in Muggle banks as collateral, then take out even bigger Muggle loans using that. The Goblins would kill if they knew how much business they were losing to the Muggles, but their rates are ridiculous. They're driving the wizard loan business away."

Harry listened, not really interested in what Malfoy was saying, but in how he managed to find something to talk about that didn't have a direct connection to the crisis in his life right now. He could babble about Muggle versus Goblin loan policies and Harry could sit with him, pretending to listen and understand about compound interest and how much you had to make to offset the Goblin exchange fees in each direction, and know that at least he was keeping Malfoy from winding up under a train.

Harry was actually started to doze off when he heard footsteps and looked up to see Dumbledore approaching. They each stood, and Malfoy took out his robes again, and Harry gave him his wand back, which he pocketed. When Dumbledore reached them, he said simply, "They're back."

They both nodded, then followed him down the corridor to the circular room where the others were waiting. Harry knew it wasn't worth it to bother asking Dumbledore how he'd found them. In a daze, Harry walked along next to Hermione; they went through the great bronze door again, past the gauntlet of reporters, into the ancient chamber where wizarding law had been tested, for better or worse, for more than a millenia before Hogwarts even existed.

They took the same seats they had before and waited. Harry saw Cornelius Fudge seat himself behind Narcissa Malfoy again. There was no way he could keep all of the foreign press from writing about Voldemort's return, even if he continued to suppress it in the Daily Prophet. What would he do now? Harry wondered. Which side was he really on?

The jury finally filed back into the room. Then the dementors returned with Lucius Malfoy, who was chained to the chair once more. At last, Eustace Bean walked down the rows of seats and stood next to the chair. Lucius Malfoy's jaw was set. He glared around the room. Harry met his eyes at one point; he saw him look at his son, at Bean, at the Weasleys and the jury members, who looked visibly nervous. Please, thought Harry desperately. Please let them be brave enough to do the right thing, to not fear Voldemort and the Death Eaters...

"Lucius Malfoy!" Eustace Bean pronounced loudly and deliberately. "You have heard and answered the charges against you. Do you have anything else to say in your defense?"

He stared into space, not dignifying this question with a response. Bean nodded, as though he'd expected as much. He turned to the jury and nodded. The same witch who'd requested privacy for them to reach their decision stood again, a sheaf of parchments in her hand which shook vigorously due to her nervousness. Bean looked at her intently. Then his voice rang out in the stone-walled chamber:

"Do you have a verdict?"

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty-One

Legacy

"Do you have a verdict?"

Eustace Bean's voice rang out in the stone chamber. The witch standing and holding the sheaf of parchment swallowed and looked at Lucius Malfoy, who then turned and gazed at her with a malevolence which made her turn ashen and shake even more, although she managed to remain upright. But through her shaking and fear, she finally was able to speak.

"We do."

A low rumble started to move through the room, growing slightly louder, then dying out again,

until there was silence once more. The witch cleared her throat and read:

“Charge one: Illegally training an underage wizard to Apparate. The defendant is found guilty and ordered to pay the Improper Use of Magic Office and the Department of Magical Transportation each a fine of one thousand Galleons.

“Charge two: Conspiring in the initiation of Draco Malfoy into the Death Eaters. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charge three: Conspiring in Draco Malfoy being placed under Cruciatus: The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charge four: Conspiring to conceal the murder of Igor Karkaroff. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charges five through nine and charges twenty-four and twenty-five, appended at the prisoner’s request: Recruiting Penelope Clearwater, Marcus Flint, Percy Weasley, Roger Davies, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger to be Death Eaters. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to fourteen years in Azkaban.

“Charges ten through fifteen: conspiracy to murder Beryl Clearwater, Reginald Clearwater, Wilmer Clearwater, Jeremy Clearwater, Aurelia Flint and Letitia Carpenter. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to eighteen years in Azkaban and required to liquidate all assets to be divided among the heirs of the deceased.

“Charge sixteen: Placing Cho Chang under Imperius. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban.

Charges seventeen and eighteen: Placing Kathryn Bell and Alicia Spinnet under Imperius. And charge nineteen: Administering a potion to Hermione Granger that acts like Imperius. The jury recommends that these three charges be suspended and reviewed at a later date pending the apprehension and trial of Matthias Avery and Gunther Nott.

“Charges twenty through twenty-two: Kidnapping and detaining Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to nine years in Azkaban and ordered to pay Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter one-thousand Galleons each.

“Charge twenty-three: Placing the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban.”

A low murmur started moving through the chamber as those assembled considered the consequences of Lucius Malfoy’s actions. Hermione had been doing the calculations in her head. “That’s fifty years *plus* two life sentences, as well as the fines and the liquidation of the assets,” she whispered to Ron and Harry. “They didn’t go easy on him.” She was smiling, looking at the witch who had read out the verdicts and sentences. Harry also looked at the jury; he wanted to memorize every face on it, imprint them on his mind forever. *We must choose between what is right and what is easy.* He looked at Lucius Malfoy, who was glaring at Eustace Bean, not looking happy. Ha, Harry thought. His Ministry connections failed him. Even Cornelius Fudge can’t help you now, Malfoy.

He heard a wail then, and Narcissa Malfoy ran from the chamber, a handkerchief held over her face in anguish. Lucius Malfoy did not look at her. Harry leaned forward and raised his eyebrows at Draco Malfoy, who saw and whispered, “It’s the liquidation of assets thing.” He was smiling. “She needn’t have told me not to come back to Malfoy Manor. Looks like she won’t be going back either—at least, not for long.” Harry nodded. She would be destitute, no money or place to live. Harry wasn’t sure Draco Malfoy should look so gleeful about this, but

then his mother *had* just a little while ago disowned him and recommended that he kill himself... When the murmur had died down again, Cornelius Fudge stood. "As the Minister of Magic," he said, "I suspend Mr. Malfoy's life sentences, inasmuch as he has given us the names of Matthias Avery and Gunther Nott, who will be apprehended and tried for murder. The fines will stand. I also suspend half of the other sentences."

Eustace Bean glared at Fudge and Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore, who seemed utterly unsurprised. That left Malfoy with twenty-five years in Azkaban. He would be sixty-seven upon leaving. Considering how long wizards live, Harry thought, looking at Dumbledore, that still left him more than half his life to live after that. The beauty of a life sentence being placed on a wizard, Harry thought, was that his life was very, very long. *Could Fudge just do this?*

There was not just a murmur in the chamber now; there threatened to be a riot. But evidently, Fudge did in fact have the right to do this. Harry supposed it was a lucky thing that he hadn't pardoned Malfoy completely. Perhaps that was some gesture to appear to be fair and impartial. Harry was convinced that, come what may, Fudge had to be ousted from his post. This was a travesty of justice. Suspending the life sentences!

He turned to see Ron's face. Oddly, he was beaming. "What's wrong with you?" Harry whispered, unsure whether he'd be heard in the hubbub.

"A thousand Galleons," Ron said simply, grinning. "And I didn't have to be a Triwizard Champion," he laughed. "I just had to get myself kidnapped." Harry also laughed. Trust Ron to see it in those terms. Well, he would finally have a little money. That was nice for him. Harry didn't care about the money. He cared about Fudge cutting Malfoy's years in prison down to a mere twenty-five. He cared about Fudge's motivations. Fudge looked at Harry now, a cold look that Harry returned. I will not look away, he thought. This cowardly little wizard will not make me take back what I said about Voldemort returning, as much as he wants to deny it. Fudge looked away first. Then the door in the corner opened again, and the dementors returned, to take Lucius Malfoy to Azkaban. He *still* looked oddly cheerful, and Bean in fact remarked on this.

"May I remind you that you are going to Azkaban now?" he growled at him.

Malfoy smiled cockily. "Do you think Azkaban can hold me, when it is guarded by the natural allies of the Dark Lord? I may be there for a while...but only for a while..."

He was still smiling as they dragged him out. Harry's heart thudded painfully in his chest. He turned to Dumbledore, who nodded. "That," he said to Harry, "is why I do not like the idea of their running Azkaban. I never liked it. I fear that we may soon regret it."

The courtroom decorum was fast evaporating as the jury moved to leave and reporters jostled each other, trying to reach them. Then a reporter's face was mere inches away from Harry's, asking him something about Hewhomustnotbenamed. The reporter said it very fast. Dumbledore looked at her and said firmly, "No comment."

He and Moody managed to get the five of them out of the room and down the corridor. Harry looked over his shoulder; the Weasleys were following. When they all reached the circular room with the portals again, Dumbledore led them into one labeled MMAO, which Harry now realized meant Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. Mr. Weasley's office. And Percy's, since he worked for his dad now. Mr. Weasley led them all to his untidy office, walled off from the larger workspace, with a door with frosted glass in the top labeled simply, "A. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley hugged Ron and Ginny once they were in the office, then Harry and Hermione, and finally, hesitating only a moment, Draco Malfoy, who actually got some color in his face

when this happened, although it faded quickly. Then her husband led her to his desk chair, where she sat wearily, his hand on her shoulder. Harry looked around; it looked very similar to like the office of the headmaster of the school he'd attended before Hogwarts. There was the large desk, the swiveling chair behind it, some hard wooden chairs before it for visitors, and rows of filing cabinets on each side of the room. Perhaps because of his love of all things Muggle, Mr. Weasley had consciously decided to mimic a typical Muggle office (albeit one from about forty years ago).

Harry had unfortunately been sent to the headmaster's office multiple times for things that he did not understand, such as being on the roof of the school while being chased by Dudley and his gang. He had no control over these things when they happened, and had no plausible explanation, so he would sit in the large, hard chair before the headmaster's desk and look back at him, wide eyed and innocent, but seeming like an incorrigible little troublemaker to the stern man before him.

Harry did not miss those days, he realized. As dangerous as it was to be him, sometimes, he closed his eyes and knew that, deep down, he was still far happier being a wizard than being a boy who did not know he was a wizard, oppressed by his family and teachers and headmaster, and miserably missing his parents every day as he lived in a cupboard under the stairs.

He opened his eyes again and continued to look around Mr. Weasley's office. There was a window on the wall behind the desk; but then Harry realized that the window showed a view of the Burrow. "It's like another portal," Mr. Weasley explained when he saw Harry puzzling at it. "Except it's just a view. I can't actually go through and be in the garden at home. I could choose any view I like; I chose this one."

"Why didn't you ever bring us to work, Dad?" Ron asked him. His father looked odd.

"I've brought you to work, surely? Of course I have..."

"No, you haven't," Ginny agreed with Ron.

"Nor the twins," Ron added.

"Well, he brought me," Charlie said. "And Bill. I was ten and Bill was twelve. I met you," he said to Moody, nodding.

Moody looked back at him shrewdly. "That's right, we did meet. You were just a lad. And I also met your--"

"Ah!" Mrs. Weasley screamed. Everyone stared at her. She had leapt to her feet and was looking terrified. "I mean, I mean--" she faltered, then turned to the view of the Burrow. "Look at the weeds in the garden! And those gnomes just running around like they own the place!" She turned to Ron and Ginny. "I'll have plenty of work for you two and the twins when the term is over."

Harry looked at the view of the Burrow, thinking that her reaction to the garden was very strange. He didn't see any gnomes. But he also thought it was a nice view for Mr. Weasley to have in his office. Mrs. Weasley had calmed down. He looked around the office some more, at some wizard photos on the walls that showed the Weasley family, the children at different stages in their lives. He smiled at a photo of Ron and Ginny playing in the garden with George and Fred. Ginny couldn't have been more than four, Ron five and the twins seven. They smiled and waved, the wind lifting their red hair slightly. Then Harry felt another presence next to him and turned to see Draco Malfoy looking at the same picture. Ginny and Ron and Hermione had been in here earlier and seen everything; they were chatting excitedly with the older Weasley brothers and Mr. Weasley about the verdict.

"I wish," Harry said softly, "I'd grown up with them. The Weasleys. I wish Ron hadn't just become my best friend when I was eleven."

Malfoy nodded. "I've never had a real friend." He also spoke softly. The others were making quite a lot of noise, ignoring them.

"What? There's Crabbe and Goyle."

He grimaced. "They're just kids of my dad's friends. We all got thrown together all the time. Didn't have much choice. They were easy to boss around, not being too bright. I couldn't actually *talk* to them. I don't just--um--what I mean to say about Ginny is--"

"You talk. You're also friends. That's good."

"I feel like I can tell her almost anything."

"Almost?"

"Well, there are some things she doesn't need me to tell her..."

"Such as when your hormones are completely out of control? Yeah, she can probably figure that out when she's standing facing you with a chair in one hand and a whip in the other."

Malfoy got a lopsided smile and a faraway look on his face. "Ginny with a whip...now there's an image..."

Harry laughed softly and shook his head. "I should expect it by now, but you always surprise me, Malfoy..."

"Thank you, thank you."

Just then, Ginny herself came over to them and put her arm through Malfoy's, pillowing her head on his shoulder. She nodded at the picture of her with Ron and the twins.

"That was Ron's fifth birthday. Mum always did parties in the garden. We'd play at throwing the garden gnomes over the wall and such. It's been strange being at school for our birthdays every year since starting at Hogwarts. And the loneliest year of my life was when Ron went away to school and I was the only one left at home." Harry had never thought of that before. Just Ginny and her mother and father. It did sound lonely.

Harry sighed. "I *wish* my birthday happened at school. Spending my birthday with the Dursleys is one of the most depressing things in the world."

Malfoy didn't speak. Ginny kissed his cheek lightly. "Your birthday is coming soon, Draco. What do you usually do?"

He swallowed, looking at her. "I used to get to do whatever I wanted..." And then Harry realized that Ginny had been unintentionally tactless, asking him about this, when he no longer had a home or family to speak of. She covered her mouth.

"Oh, Draco, that was so stupid of me."

He shook his head. "Nah. I'll get used to it. Eventually. There are a lot of things I'll probably do automatically, before realizing that I can't, or shouldn't. It'll take a while..."

She put her head back on his shoulder and Harry looked back and forth between her and her younger self. He smiled. "You haven't actually changed very much since the age of four, have you, Gin?"

She looked a little miffed. "I hope I have..."

"I mean your face. It's impossible not to know that that's you." He nodded at the photo. She still had the same snub childish nose covered in freckles, the same large brown eyes, the same thin, pale face under the mop of flaming hair. Hermione suddenly appeared at his elbow, and also put her arm through his, as Ginny had done with Malfoy.

"What are we talking about?"

“Whether we’ve changed since that photo was taken,” Ginny said, nodding at it. Hermione looked.

“Oh, yes, we saw that one earlier. Weren’t they all so cute! But the boys have changed a lot, don’t you think?”

Harry looked at her for a moment, then at the waving Ron and George and Fred. At that age, the three boys looked far more similar than they did now. All three had the bright red hair, the freckles. Ron’s nose wasn’t as long as it was when Harry met him; it was closer to being like Ginny’s. Fred and George were laughing; they were each missing some teeth, but different ones. “Fred and George didn’t lose the same teeth at the same time?”

“Oh, mum loved that. For a while she could actually tell them apart.” Ginny smiled. Harry moved further along the wall, taking Hermione along with him. Ginny and Draco followed. Here was a photo of Percy without his glasses on and one of the twins, Harry didn’t know which, and the two of them were playing in the sand on a beach at about the ages of eight and ten. Harry pointed at it. “Is that Fred or George? And where’s everyone else?”

Ginny looked very uncomfortable and swallowed. “Actually, that’s Bill and Charlie. Probably about two years before Percy was born. Seventy-four. Over twenty years ago.” Harry frowned; why was she acting odd? And he’d never thought about the large age difference between Charlie and Percy. Charlie and Bill were ten and twelve when Percy was born. That meant...Harry realized for the first time...

“Ginny--Bill and Charlie--when they were in school--did they know my mum and dad?” Ginny nodded. She didn’t look like she wanted to talk. Harry thought quickly; if Bill was in his first year at Hogwarts in 1975, his mum and dad would have been in their fifth year. Prefects. A year before he saw his mum and Snape in the Potions Dungeon...although, perhaps that was at the end of their fifth year...And in their seventh year, Bill would have been in his third and Charlie in first.

He turned and looked at Bill and Charlie, wondering why they’d never said anything to him before. But then he thought about how much interaction he had with students four years younger than him. He probably had more contact with Will Flitwick than any of the others, only because he felt Will was a friend now, after the way he’d stood up for him in the Great Hall. It just seemed so strange to be standing so close to people who’d gone to school with his parents who weren’t--well, grownups. Although he knew that technically, they were. Bill was thirty-two and Charlie was thirty. They just didn’t *seem* much like other adults. But then, they’d grown up during Voldemort’s first reign of terror. Perhaps they felt some of their childhoods had been taken from them, and they weren’t ready to settle down yet.

Then he came upon a picture of two little red-haired girls that looked remarkably like Ginny, except that they both had blue eyes. They were sitting around a Christmas Tree with what he now knew was Bill and Charlie. They were all laughing and getting ready to open presents. Bill and Charlie seemed a little older than in the beach photo, maybe fourteen and twelve, while the girls seemed about six and eight. Harry pointed.

“Who are they?”

“Cousins,” Hermione told him. “Ron told me earlier. They were visiting for the holidays. That was the year the twins were born, before Ron and Ginny came along.”

Harry nodded. “Well, you can tell they’re Weasleys. What are their names?”

Ginny looked uncomfortable again and turned to Professor Dumbledore. “Professor--do you think it’s safe yet? To get past the reporters? Don’t we have to get a train back?”

Dumbledore looked down at Ginny kindly. "Quite right, Ginny. The five of you will probably need to sleep on the train. The dining car will be in place, so you can have a nice dinner before that."

Harry wondered why Ginny was uncomfortable about the picture of her cousins. They weren't much younger than Bill and Charlie, so they'd be adults now. Had they gone bad? Were they the family shame? He looked at Malfoy, who looked as uncomfortable about it as Ginny. Hmm...Harry thought. Whatever it was, it looked like Ginny had told Malfoy about it. He definitely did not look ignorant.

They said goodbye to the Weasleys and followed Dumbledore back to the wall that Malfoy hadn't been able to penetrate. After that they walked to where they'd originally come through from the station, the wall with POTTER on the other side. Lucius Malfoy thought Azkaban couldn't hold him while it was run by dementors, and Voldemort had marked the entrance to the Ministry of Magic with an indelible kind of graffiti. Harry should have felt like a lot of things were resolved, but he didn't. Wormtail was still on the loose, and until he was caught, Sirius had to still be on the run too. The Death Eaters still had it out for Snape, and probably now Draco Malfoy as well. Many problems were solved, and yet many remained....

As the train moved away, Harry watched the POTTER on the wall of the station until it disappeared from view.

* * * * *

The following week, Harry felt like his head was going to explode from simultaneously preparing for the O.W.L.s and the final Quidditch match of the year. On Saturday was the match, then he would have still another week to stuff things into his brain before taking the O.W.L.s. He despaired of surviving it all. Suddenly, taking on dark wizards seemed like the easiest thing he'd done all year. And after exams, there was still the Dueling Club demonstration...He felt like curling up in a little ball in a cave and hibernating.

After spending what felt like a solid week on his broomstick (and being very thankful for broomstick cushioning charms), the day of the match dawned sunny and fair. Everyone was in good health, so Ginny would be able to sit in the stands and watch the rest of them play. Harry thought briefly of feigning illness himself so that she could play; somehow, he felt it would be much more of a sure thing with her playing Seeker. He also wasn't sure how ruthless he could be against Cho Chang; it was because of him that she'd been in an enchanted sleep for forty days (really Malfoy, of course, but it was indirectly because of him). He tried to get over this thought and remind himself that the Ravenclaw captain was Roger Davies; beating Roger was something he could get behind. Roger probably wanted his last Quidditch match as captain to be one for the record books. Harry knew he'd be facing a very determined Head Boy.

The Slytherin/Ravenclaw match had been an intense one, with the combination of Liam Quirke and Evan Davies as Beaters wreaking havoc with the Slytherin Chasers (who still scored quite a lot), such that the Ravenclaw Chaser combination of Mandy Brocklehurst, Padma Patil and Niamh Quirke had racked up three-hundred fifty points to Slytherin's two-hundred and forty before Malfoy caught the Snitch, making the final Slytherin score a whopping three-hundred ninety. As a result, even though they only scored in two out of their three games, Slytherin was in the lead for the cup with seven-hundred points, and Ravenclaw was second with five-hundred sixty. That meant that all Ravenclaw had to do was get the Snitch and they would have ten points more than Slytherin and win the Quidditch cup. Gryffindor needed one-hundred ninety to win the cup.

The Gryffindor team rose early and went running together, as Harry had had them do before. Hermione came along, but Ginny did not. Afterward, when they entered the Great Hall in their team robes, the other Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs were cheering for them, while the Slytherins reserved their support for Ravenclaw. Interesting, thought Harry. They'll do anything to *not* support Gryffindor, won't they? Of course, Hufflepuff was already out of the running, but still...

After breakfast, the entire population of the school flowed down to the Quidditch pitch. There were already some families there that had made a special trip to see the match. The Weasleys were much in evidence, waving to the twins and Ron, as well as Harry. He waved back, smiling, glad to be friendly with them again, hoping he wouldn't humiliate himself with Charlie Weasley sitting right there...

He saw Draco Malfoy sitting near Snape on the other side of the stands, and no one else within a stone's throw of them. Then that changed; the Scottish girl who'd asked him out came near and nodded at the place on the other side of Malfoy. He raised his eyebrows but nodded back at her, letting her sit. She wasn't bad looking, really. She had wiry black hair and dark eyes, she was rather pale but slightly freckled, and a bit on the thin side. Malfoy looked surprised. Harry almost started to wonder whether the Sorting Hat could have made a mistake with her and Malfoy.

Harry and Roger Davies walked to the middle of the pitch with their teams and Madam Hooch. They shook hands, Harry looking into Roger's eyes, trying to tell what he was thinking. Roger looked back malevolently, making Harry shudder involuntarily. All right, he thought. That's how it is. No quarter.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and fifteen broomsticks rose into the air. Lee Jordan's magically magnified voice announced, "And it's the last Quidditch match of the year! This will decide whether the Quidditch Cup will go to--" he paused meaningfully "--Gryffindor--" much cheering from the crowd as he drew out the house name. "Ravenclaw," he said derisively, as though it were ludicrous, "or those bounders in *Slytherin*..." he sneered with feeling. "Jordan!" Professor McGonagall admonished him. He straightened up and continued his commentary, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"And Gryffindor captain Harry Potter is in fine form on his Firebolt today, while much of the rest of the team is on excellent Nimbus 2001's. I see the Ravenclaw Seeker is still poking along on a Cleansweep--And Gryffindor Chaser Katie Bell passes to Johnson, Johnson swerves a Bludger hit by Ravenclaw thug Evan Davies--"

"Jordan--"

"I mean Ravenclaw *Beater* Evan Davies...while Chaser Alicia Spinnet takes the Quaffle and-- YES! Gryffindor, ten, Ravenclaw, zero! As the Head Girl gives the Head Boy what-for!"

Roger Davies was glowering at Alicia after she flung the Quaffle through the far right goal; he was about to move there when he realized she wasn't aiming for the far left, but he was too late. Alicia gave him a smug smile and raced off with Katie while Angelina took possession of the Quaffle once more, only to lose it to Niamh Quirke.

"Oh! And Chaser Quirke of Ravenclaw intercepts a pass Chaser Johnson meant for Katie Bell! Nice bit of cheating there..."

"Jordan..."

"And--there! Stooging! The Ravenclaw Chasers are Stooging! Penalty to Gryffindor!"

Lee was right; Niamh and Mandy were both in the scoring area in front of the Gryffindor goals

at the same time, so it mattered not that Ron easily prevented the Quaffle from entering the center goal. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and collected the Quaffle from Ron. Harry decided Angelina should take the penalty; she was their best feinter when taking penalty shots, most likely to fool Roger Davies. Sure enough, she succeeded in making him zip toward the wrong goal.

“Gryffindor TWENTY, Ravenclaw ZERO!” Jordan called out gleefully. “That’s where Stooging will get you!” Professor McGonagall also looked a bit smugly in Professor Flitwick’s direction, not restraining Lee this time.

Harry flew a little above the rest of the players, scanning the field for the Snitch at the same time that he was keeping an eye on the Bludgers Liam and Evan were hitting. He saw that Cho Chang was marking him, as was her usual strategy, and he gave her a feeble smile before focusing grimly on the field below once more. Fred and George were giving as good as they were getting, but it was starting to look like someone would wind up in the hospital wing. He had no idea how close to right he was, however, until Liam Quirke did a Bludger Backbeat just as Alicia, Katie and Angelina were heading toward the Ravenclaw goals with the Quaffle again, sending the iron ball behind him, directly toward the part of the stands where the Gryffindor supporters were sitting. There was a hue and cry as spectators scrambled to get out of the way. Will Flitwick narrowly avoided being hit, splintered wood was flying after the heavy ball hit the seat where he’d been moments before, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle hysterically while Jordan yelled expletives which would normally have resulted in his being reprimanded by McGonagall, except that *she* was now using quite surprising language directed at Liam Quirke and examining young Will for any damage. Even Professor Flitwick was on his feet yelling at Liam.

“That’s my great-nephew, you sodding job!” he cried at him; which was strong language indeed for the little wizard.

“Right!” Jordan went on with the commentary once he’d gotten the bad language out of his system. “And because of Beater Quirke engaging in a dirty bit of Bumpling--which *I* also like to call *cheating*--another penalty to Gryffindor! Fat lot of good it did you to stop the game!” When Madam Hooch had blown her whistle, the Gryffindor Chasers had been forced to stop their drive to the Ravenclaw goalposts.

So Angelina took the Quaffle once more, but this time Roger Davies was ready and intercepted it before it could go through the center goal. He pulled back his arm and flung it in a long pass to Niamh Quirke, who sped toward Ron, who was glaring at her as he hovered back and forth before the goals. She sent the ball flying toward the right goal and Ron handily picked it out of the air, his long arm reaching for it effortlessly. Not missing a beat, he reared back and passed it on to Katie, who, with Angelina and Alicia formed an arrowhead pattern, flying toward the Ravenclaw goalposts.

“And the Gryffindor Chasers move into the classic Hawkshead Attacking Formation, scattering the Ravenclaw players. Careful to avoid Stooging, now, now now NOW! Yes! Katie Bell scores! Gryffindor THIRTY, Ravenclaw STILL ZERO! That’s my girl!” Then Lee ducked his head as McGonagall turned to him in surprise, speechless about this last exclamation. Harry smiled as he scanned the field. He’d suspected as much, since that first match when Ginny had had to step in for Katie...

There. He saw it. The Snitch was half-way up the far left Gryffindor goalpost. He looked away, hoping Cho Chang hadn’t seen it; he moved toward the center of the field, hoping she would

follow. If she caught it, Ravenclaw would win the cup; if he caught it now, they would win the match, but not the cup. At least not technically; they would share the cup with Slytherin, tied with seven-hundred points each.

They would share the cup with Slytherin.

He pushed out of his head the horrible consequences of saying to Cedric, *We'll take the cup together*. Suddenly, Harry knew what he was going to do. With a glance at Cho Chang to make certain she'd believed his feint away from the Gryffindor goalposts, he made a sudden about face and sped toward the Snitch, still hovering there. He turned his head for a split second, looking toward Malfoy. Malfoy was looking straight back, his mouth open in disbelief. Harry turned toward the Snitch once more, hoping that his usually fine Chasers were not scoring again as he came nearer and nearer...

"The Gryffindor Chasers are nearing their quarry again...but what's this? Seeker and Captain Harry Potter is closing in on the Snitch! Hurry up girls, score again before he touches it! Oh, no! No NO NO! He has the Snitch! Potter has the Snitch! Gryffindor wins the match--and Gryffindor and Slytherin will share the Quidditch Cup!"

Harry flew around the field, the Snitch over his head. Most of the Gryffindors were looking shell-shocked and disappointed. Only Hermione and Ginny were standing and clapping on their side of the stands. On the other side, the Slytherins were equally surprised, but Malfoy and Snape and the Scottish girls were now standing and clapping. Snape turned and glared at the other Slytherins, and slowly, they all stood as well and clapped, lackadaisically at first, then with a growing enthusiasm as they perhaps realized that this was the only way they would get anything; ten more points for Gryffindor would be a clean win, and if Ravenclaw had won the match, there was no way Slytherin would have gotten anything either.

McGonagall looked toward Snape and Malfoy, and with an expression of understanding on her face now, she smiled at Harry and also stood to clap. Her glare at the other Gryffindors brought them to their feet as well. Harry flew down to the center of the field, smiling up at Ginny and Hermione, who clearly understood why he'd done it, and when he landed he met Dumbledore's eye as well, twinkling at him. This time it wouldn't go wrong, he thought. Not unless that damn cup is *also* a Portkey...

But it was definitely not a Portkey. Harry stood facing Roger, each with their team behind them, and they shook hands. Roger looked resentful, but he grasped Harry's hand with his chin up, every bit Head Boy. Then Dumbledore summoned Draco Malfoy and the Slytherin team to the field, and Harry and Malfoy each grasped one side of the Quidditch Cup and held it aloft, as the students on both sides of the pitch now roared their approval. Malfoy grinned, no *smiled* at Harry, the first genuine smile from Malfoy Harry had ever seen directed at *him*. He smiled back, then felt his smile grow even broader as they lowered their hands, giving the cup back to Dumbledore's care (so he could magically etch the year and winning house names on the base) for Hermione was pushing her way through the crowd now, her eyes locked with Harry's, and he knew before she reached him what would happen, and he didn't care.

She threw her arms around him and he drew her to him for a deep kiss. A new roar of approval went up from the crowd upon seeing this, and Hermione colored and buried her face in his neck, smiling happily anyway. Then the crowd really got a shock when Ginny threw her arms around Malfoy and did the same. Suddenly Harry didn't know where the ground was, and it was because he had been lifted bodily above the crowd, and looking to his side, he saw that Malfoy was too. The Slytherins seemed to be beyond caring about anything else he'd done

recently--they were co-winners of the cup!

As they were borne back to the castle for a joint celebration in the Great Hall--so both winning houses could celebrate together--Harry saw Viktor standing up in the seats, his arm around Cho's shoulder. They both smiled at him and each raised a silent hand, reminding Harry of how he'd bidden Hermione goodbye on September first. He raised a hand to them, smiling, as the crowd carried him off the pitch and continued up the lawn. It had actually been a good year, he thought. There'd been a few bumps along the way (if you called being recruited to be a Death Eater a "bump") and he still had the O.W.L.s to take. But some things he'd set out to do had actually worked well. Viktor and Cho. Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban. He was with Hermione, openly now. Ron was still their friend. Ginny and Draco Malfoy were happy together. And now he'd managed to do what he never thought he would *want* to do, and tied with Slytherin for the Quidditch Cup...

He turned and grinned at Malfoy again, also bobbing along above the crowd. Maybe, Malfoy, he thought; maybe you have a friend after all.

* * * * *

The celebration lasted much of the day, and when Harry dragged himself up the marble steps in the middle of the afternoon, his arm comfortably settled around Hermione's shoulders, he felt like he could sleep until Monday morning. But he had one more thing to do this day, and he checked to see where the other Gryffindor team members were--good, Fred and Alicia were following behind, George and Angelina had already gone up, he remembered, and Katie and Lee were walking ahead of them. Ginny was behind Fred and Alicia; she and Malfoy were walking with their arms around each other's waists. Every so often Fred looked over his shoulder at them, but he didn't look hostile--just big-brotherly.

When they reached the portrait hole, it had already been opened by George and Angelina, who were holding it for them. They all scrambled in, except for Ginny and Malfoy. He was giving her a very chaste kiss on the cheek, clearly aware of her brothers' proximity. Harry called to him, "Come on in, Malfoy! There's something you'll want to know about." He looked up in surprise, but did not comment, following Ginny into the common room. Harry remembered the only other time (that he knew of) Malfoy had been in their common room, when he'd caught him trying to meet with Ginny at midnight. It seemed a very long time ago.

Ron was sitting in a chair by the fire, quite exhausted, his small cat Argent curled contentedly on his lap, asleep. His eyes were closed as well. He had been the first to come upstairs. The team surrounded him quietly, Angelina and Katie looking like it was a struggle not to giggle. Harry sprinted up to the dorm, retrieved a package from his trunk, and sped down to the common room again. He stood in front of Ron, who was still oblivious to the small crowd around him. "Ron," Harry said, to wake him. He slept on. "Ron!" he tried again.

Grinning, Ginny reached out and shook him. "Ron!" she also said. "Time to wake up! Fleur Delacour is here for her date with you!" she laughed, and so did everyone else. Ron's eyes flew open in surprise, even more so when he saw all of them looking at him.

"Wha---?"

"Happy Birthday, Ron," Harry said, presenting Ron with the package from his trunk. Argent scrambled up onto the arm of the chair, rubbing her head affectionately against Ron's arm.

"What with one thing and another, I didn't have the chance to give this to you before. This seemed like an appropriate time."

Ron looked around at them all, then down at the package. He shrugged and pulled the paper

off. It was the same book he had given Harry for Christmas: *Great Quidditch Captains of Hogwarts*, by Roderick Plumpton, III. He frowned and looked up at Harry. "You're giving me the book back?"

"No you--it's another copy. I bought it by owl post. That's just part of it. Check page 428."

He watched Ron turn to the table listing the greatest Quidditch captains of Hogwarts teams in the last century (in the author's humble opinion); he watched him scan down the column, past Charlie's name, then he saw the expression on Ron's face and knew he'd come to where Harry had written in by hand, "Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor."

"Blimey," he breathed softly. Ron swallowed and looked up at him, then round at all of them.

"Captain?" he whispered. "But Harry--"

"But nothing. We've all agreed. You're the one who was really running the practices, coming up with the strategies. Which I of course scuttled, by catching the Snitch when I did..." he smiled, glancing at Malfoy. "But I'm a lousy captain. It should be you, Ron. You know I'm right. You know *we're all right*."

Ron's mouth was hanging open as he looked down at the book again, then back up at Harry. "I don't know what to say..."

"Just say you'll do it, Weasley," Malfoy drawled. "Else I'll never get out of here..."

Everyone laughed, including Ron, and he nodded at Harry, looking quite choked up. He closed the book and put it on his lap again, picking up his cat and holding her close to him, smiling and petting her while multiple hands reached out to pat him on the back and say things along the line of, "There's a good bloke...we'll come back to see you get the cup...once we're gone, you can have practices before sunrise..."

Later, Harry knew he should be studying for the O.W.L.s but he pulled Hermione into a corner of the common room, sitting down in a chair George and Angelina usually used which faced into the corner, creating a cozy refuge. He sat down, pulling her into his lap. She acquiesced, putting her arms around his shoulders, bringing her mouth to his. He felt a wave of happiness surge through him as they kissed deeper and deeper, a contentment that seemed to be beyond anything he deserved or ever thought he'd experience. He moved his hand up her leg, under her robes; now that it was June, she was wearing shorts and a T-shirt underneath, and he rested his hand comfortably on one of her thighs, feeling the warmth emanating from her skin, feeling so right about the world.

She pulled her mouth gently away from his, but it was only to move her lips to his neck. He opened his eyes now, smiling, then he thought he saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye.

"Ron?"

There was silence, then Ron walked to the corner where they were sitting, looking abashed. "I, um, didn't mean to disturb you..." His ears were quite pink. Harry realized that although the entire school had seen them kiss on the Quidditch pitch, Ron had never seen the two of them just sitting like this, touching and kissing privately. Harry bit his tongue, to avoid asking whether he'd been watching them.

"You're not disturbing us. What is it?"

"I just wanted to--to thank you properly. You know, the captain thing."

Harry smiled at him. "You're welcome. Really. Quite welcome. It was driving me dotty."

Ron tried to smile back, but it looked difficult. Harry hoped he understood that he deserved it, that it wasn't charity. Ron could be so touchy sometimes. Harry had wondered whether he'd be able to convince him to take the position; he remembered Ron saying that in the Mirror of

Erised, he was Head Boy and captain of the Quidditch Team...

"I'm going to make you work, you know," he smiled at Harry now.

"You're the one who's going to have to work. You have two Chasers and two Beaters to replace."

"Correction: one Chaser and two Beaters. I'm not going to be Keeper anymore. Ginny's going to train for that. Not too far off from Seeker, after all. And Ginny says Zoey Russell is a pretty good Chaser as well. So we could have her, perhaps, and I'll finally be a Chaser, too, like I wanted to be." Harry remembered his performance in the first match of the year; he was a fabulous Chaser. There'd be no stopping them with Ron in this position. He remembered seeing his dad playing...

"That just leaves the Beaters. What about Dean and Seamus?"

"Nah. Dean's hopeless. All he cares about is football. Seamus dragged him to the World Cup. And Seamus wants Lee's old job."

Harry laughed. "Think of the blarney he'll throw around."

"Too right! There's this fourth year I thought might be good for a Beater--I've seen him flying a bit. Ginny said his name's Anthony Perugia."

"Tony? Yeah, he's a good flyer. What about the other?"

"Well--what do you think about--Neville? Think he'd agree?"

Harry smiled. "Yeah. I really think he would."

"Hope so. Have you noticed how big he is now? Kind of snuck up on us all, didn't he?"

Harry agreed. Then Ron looked a bit embarrassed again. "Well, I'll be leaving you two alone again..."

"Oh, no, Ron!" Hermione said, standing. "Let's do something together, the three of us!" Ron and Harry looked at each other uncertainly. "Oh, you--" she sputtered. "I mean--let's go down to Hagrid's! Come on!" She headed for the portrait hole and they followed. Harry knew she didn't want to exclude Ron, but he realized now that it would be a bit of a balancing act, having time together and with Ron as well. It would work itself out, he thought optimistically. They just had to get used to a new way of doing things. Everything would be all right.

* * * * *

Harry dragged himself into the dorm and threw himself onto the bed violently, but with relief.

"Ouch!" Sandy said suddenly.

"Sorry, Sandy. I'm just glad *that's* over."

"What?"

"The O.W.L.s."

"Was it that bad?"

"Weren't you paying any attention?"

"I was asleep much of the time."

"Oh. Wish I could say the same. Wait--I was asleep for history of magic and astronomy..."

"Harry Potter?"

"What?"

"What are the O.W.L.s?"

"Very, very annoying tests of our magical knowledge and skills. Five years' worth, except for Care of Magical Creatures and Divination, which were three years' worth."

"Is it important?"

"Rather important. But I think I did well on most things."

Harry, Ron and Hermione had barely slept during the week after the Quidditch Cup. They didn't have to go to classes. They were to spend the time preparing for the tests, and Hermione rode herd on them and made sure that's what they were doing every waking hour (which was far more hours than they *should* have been awake, in Harry's opinion). Most nights they dragged themselves upstairs at two or three in the morning, muscles moving toward the dorm on auto-pilot. One night they simply stayed where they were, Hermione sitting at one of the tables, her cheek on an Arithmancy text, snoring softly, while Harry sat next to her leaning on her shoulder (he was rather appalled to discover that he'd drooled on her robes when he awoke in the morning) and Ron spread-eagled on the hearthrug, his face on an Herbology text which was merely in close proximity to his brain, rather than part of the contents of it.

Then, the following Monday morning, it had begun: they walked in the Potions dungeon and Snape started in on them. They spent the entire day brewing potions and writing essays and taking tests about potions ingredients and counter-indications and poison antidotes. Potions took longer than any of their other tests because of the need to wait for things to bubble and brew. At the end of the first day, Harry felt great relief that that was over, but reminded himself there were still more tests to get through.

On Tuesday, they would have Transfiguration and Charms. Harry transfigured McGonagall's desk into a pig, as he'd once seen her do; he changed other inanimate objects into animate ones, and animate ones into inanimate ones. He changed things which he'd already changed, taking a shoe, at one point, through five transfigurations, from hedgehog to bowler hat to Yorkshire terrier to tea-cozy to rabbit, before he started to give out and produced a knife-box (with rather pronounced rabbit ears and a cotton tail) that *barked*.

Then she'd cleared out the room, and instead of going down to lunch with the others, he demonstrated for her, formally and for the record, his ability to do the Animagus transfiguration. She used a stop-watch to time him, over and over, changing into a golden griffin and back, griffin and back, griffin and back, until he collapsed on the floor from the pain and mental effort. She smiled at him and nodded. He staggered from the room, meeting Ron and Hermione in the corridor, and they'd practically carried him down to the Great Hall.

Charms went well, Harry knew, because Professor Flitwick was so terrible at doing a poker face. There was no chance that a student taking the Charms O.W.L.s had to wait until they received their results to know how they did with *him*. Harry went through the basics, then the intermediate-level charms, and then Flitwick asked all students to stay past the usual time who wanted credit for advanced charms.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were the only Gryffindors who stayed. The test was basically dueling with Flitwick, who'd been a champion in his youth. Ron went down very quickly; Hermione held her own for some time, before he also disarmed her. After dueling for more than half an hour, Flitwick and Harry were still at it, and Harry had abandoned his robes and was dripping sweat, while the little wizard was still cool as a cucumber and pacing around humming to himself before aiming his wand at Harry nonchalantly and muttering charms.

After more than an hour, Flitwick stood still and faced an exhausted Harry and lowered his wand. "Bow, Harry," he told him gently. "The duel is over. It is a draw."

Harry lowered his wand and bowed, and that's when he heard, "Expelliarmus!" and felt his wand slipping from his grip, felt himself hurtling backward, bracing himself before he struck the wall hard, and, wincing, sliding down into a sitting position. Flitwick smiled and walked over to him, handing him his wand.

“Really, Harry. You should have known better,” he smiled at him. Harry looked up at the professor, his eyes unfocussed.

“I do now.” Flitwick helped him stand and patted him on the back. But Harry had a feeling that he hadn’t exactly failed advanced Charms.

If he thought it was exhausting to study for the O.W.L.s, it was nothing compared to taking them. Wednesday, they started off with Herbology, an entire morning of wrestling with plants in the greenhouse, then taking exhaustive tests about the magical herbs and fungi they’d been learning about for five years. In the afternoon, they had History of Magic. Three hours of sitting in Binns’ stuffy classroom writing about Goblin rebellions. He actually fell asleep, and when he awoke, Hermione was shaking him and telling him to hand in his parchment. He looked down at it. He’d written one sentence about someone he’d named Oscar the Offbeat, who Harry wasn’t even sure had existed. He groaned; he would not be getting a History of Magic O.W.L. He looked at Ron, who was handing in several parchments of closely-written script. Even Ron had had quite a lot to write for History of Magic. When Hermione wasn’t looking, he crumpled up the parchment and stuffed it in his pocket. He just wouldn’t hand in anything at all. Better than the humiliation of handing *this* in, he thought. He’d blown it.

That night at midnight, they had astronomy. Harry again felt as though he were sleepwalking, and Professor Sinistra was short with him. Another flop, he thought. Ron was also the walking dead. Neither of them expected to get an Astronomy O.W.L.

The next morning they were permitted to sleep in, because of the late Astronomy test, and in the afternoon they were to report to Hagrid for Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid had a virtual zoo for them to walk through, and his test was multiple-choice. Harry thought he was probably being pretty easy on them, and wondered whether Dumbledore had approved this. It was the easiest test so far, Harry felt. Afterward, he heaved a sigh of relief. Just two to go: Divination and Defense against the Dark Arts.

On Friday morning, he and Ron and the other Gryffindors other than Hermione reported to Trelawney’s tower, while Hermione went off to Professor Vector for Arithmancy testing. They went through tea leaves, palmistry, augury, star charts (not for nothing had he done terribly in astronomy), crystal balls, Tarot cards...every form of soothsaying they’d covered since their first day with her in their third year. Trelawney glared at him time after time; he was terrible at everything. Even Ron had something to say most of the time that was spot on or close enough. I have a snake who has the Sight and I’m not going to get an O.W.L. in Divination. Something was wrong somewhere, he felt. But he also knew he shouldn’t cheat; he’d left Sandy by the fire in the common room.

After lunch, they reported to Moody. He had them work on a written test about werewolves, vampires and other dark creatures that they couldn’t actually bring to class, then they handed in their papers and actually confronted some dark creatures they’d studied with Lupin. After the redcaps, Hinkypunks and Grindylows had been despatched, he opened a drawer and produced--a boggart.

The boggart took on a different form for some of them than it had when they were in third year. Not surprisingly, Hermione’s looked like Professor McGonagall expelling her and telling her she’d failed every subject. Neville’s was merely a flask of steaming potion. Parvati’s turned into--Hermione. Harry saw it first, then turned her around and spoke to her rapidly, until Parvati had taken care of it and Seamus was stepping up. Finally, Harry faced the boggart, and, remembering the dementors who had brought Lucius Malfoy in and out of the courtroom, sure

enough, it promptly turned into a dementor.

Harry grimly faced it down, focused intently on his happy thought (now that he'd been with Hermione *that* was easy) and cried, "*Expecto Patronem!*"

The silver-grey stag emerged from his wand-tip and raced toward the boggart-dementor. Then Harry looked at it again, crying "*Riddikulus!*" and it disappeared with a *pop!*

Moody stared in disbelief at him. "Potter," he said, clearly in awe, which shook Harry somewhat. "You didn't tell me you could conjure a Patronus. And *what* a Patronus..."

Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry. We discovered in third year that when I'm confronted with a boggart, it turns into a dementor, so Lupin taught me how to conjure a Patronus..."

"You're *sorry?*" Moody said, incredulous. "You're doing something so advanced most adult wizards can't, and you're *sorry?*" He shook his head. "You're the damnedest thing I've ever seen, Potter..."

After they did various curses and counter-curses, he dismissed everyone except those who wanted to stay to do advanced Dark Arts. "I've already seen you conjure your Patronus, so you've already got points for that, Potter. Now, let's see that pain blocking you've become so famous for..."

And without any warning, Moody pointed his wand at him and cried, "*Hara Kiri!*"

Harry's eyes rolled back in his head; he felt himself floating up, up, and, looking down, he watched his body in fascination, watched Moody moving slowly, watched Hermione anxiously put her hand to her mouth in slow motion, then her other hand on Ron's arm as Ron stared at him, his jaw dropping in tiny increments...

When Harry saw Moody lift his wand, he allowed himself to slide back down into his body. He collapsed on the floor, panting, then struggled to stand. Moody nodded.

"Good job, Potter." That was all he said. Harry swallowed and nodded back at him. That was it. It was all done. All they had to do now was wait for the results.

Harry closed his eyes, lying on the bed; he felt like he could sleep for a week. After dreading the O.W.L.s all year (with good reason, he now knew), they were actually over. He did in fact sleep straight through until the next morning. He awoke with the sun and rose to dress for running, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from him. Ron was still asleep, sprawled across his bed diagonally (the only way he could fit on it all the way). When Harry went down to the common room, Hermione wasn't there, but he didn't bother waiting. If she had any sense, he thought, she'd sleep in. If *I* had any sense, perhaps *I* would, he thought. But he was feeling restless after sleeping for more than fourteen hours; he wanted to be active, doing *something*.

The Quidditch pitch was deserted, dewy and pristine-looking. Harry ran on the sandy path until he felt he'd exorcised something from his soul, some restless demon that had been possessing him, making it hurt when he took a breath. Now, even though his lungs were working at maximum capacity, he felt at peace. Everything was as it should be. He did some sit-ups and pull-ups and stretches afterward, then returned to the castle with a spring in his step.

In the prefects' bathroom, he encountered Malfoy, but that no longer had the power to ruin his day. He merely sauntered in, smiling at him as he soaked in the tub, saying cheerfully, "Good morning, Malfoy! Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Malfoy had had his eyes closed and opened them now. He leaned against one of the short sides of the tub, his arms spread out on either side of him on the tub ledge. He no longer bothered to hide the Dark Mark. There was no need to bother.

“You’re damn cheerful for this time of the morning, Potter. Jump in the lake, will you?”

“Actually, I thought I’d take a shower. Maybe I’ll do a swim in the lake later...” he practically chirped as he headed for the showers. He saw Malfoy shake his head.

“You, Potter, are too happy to be allowed...”

“But the O.W.L.s are over!” Harry crowed as he stood under the pounding water, making the noise echo off the tile and marble lining the room. He turned and saw Malfoy putting his head around the corner.

“I have two words for you, Potter. SHUT THE BLOODY HELL UP.”

“That’s five words.”

“It *would* be two if you didn’t make me swear.”

“That wouldn’t be any fun,” Harry laughed, letting the water gush over his head. He flung his head back then and turned the water off, grinning at Malfoy. “Aren’t you glad it’s over?”

As Harry wrapped a towel around his waist, Malfoy nodded, finally admitting this. “I can’t believe Moody...or McGonagall. Or Flitwick. Or Sprout...” He plunged his hands into the pockets of the deep green bathrobe he’d donned. Harry frowned. What was wrong with him? Yes, he’d been disowned...but this seemed to have to do with something else.

“Don’t you think you did well, Malfoy?”

Malfoy jerked his head up. “I did bloody well, thank you very much. I fully expect to get more than ten O.W.L.s. In fact, I bet I’ll get more than you.”

Harry thought about the advanced credit he was going to be getting in Transfiguration, Dark Arts and Charms. “Bet you won’t,” he smiled. “But if you get more than ten--that’d be really impressive. I mean, I’d think you’d be happy. What’s your problem? Why aren’t you celebrating them being over?”

Malfoy walked back toward the tub, started draining it and collecting his clothes. “And just who am I going to celebrate *with*? The only Slytherins who’ll have anything to do with me are Snape and that fourth-year, what’s-her-name. And I’m starting to think she fancies me, so I don’t want to hang around her too much and give her the wrong impression...”

“Or you could spend *all* of your spare time with her. Then she’d probably stop fancying you pretty fast.” Harry laughed as Malfoy threw a damp towel at him, catching it while it was still in the air.

“You can laugh, Potter. Even if you only got two O.W.L.s, you’d have people to commiserate with you...”

Harry sighed and bit the bullet; he should do it, he should. Malfoy was hinting about it broadly enough. “Malfoy,” he finally said, as he took a red bathrobe from the wardrobe. “Dumbledore said that he’s going to let everyone third year and up go into Hogsmeade again next Saturday. We’ll be getting our O.W.L. results on Friday. No matter what the outcome--why don’t you celebrate with us? Ginny will want to be along anyway, and then you can spend some time with her. We’ll all go down to the village after breakfast.”

Malfoy looked at him and swallowed. He hadn’t acknowledged what Harry had done in sharing the Quidditch Cup with Slytherin, but Harry knew it meant a lot to him. He was starting to understand how Ginny had had such a struggle at the beginning of their relationship to get Malfoy *not* to sabotage himself.

“If you like,” Malfoy said noncommittally. Harry nodded.

“That’s it, then,” he said firmly. After Malfoy left, Harry collected Sandy and asked her, “Why do some people find it so hard to *let* other people be nice to them?” He wasn’t just thinking of

Malfoy; Ron was this way too. They had far more in common than either of them would ever have admitted.

“I do not understand people very well, Harry Potter,” she answered, “but perhaps they feel that they do not deserve it?”

“It was a rhetorical question, Sandy. That means I wasn’t really expecting an answer. But I think you understand people better than you think you do.” He wrapped her around his arm and left.

* * * * *

The following week they didn’t have to go to class again, unless they wanted to. Harry, Hermione, Ron and Malfoy went to see Snape when they would have had Potions anyway, but they practiced for the Dueling Club exhibition instead of brewing potions. Harry was going to be demonstrating some moves against three attackers, and Snape was nodding grimly as he aimed his curses and deflected the curses Ron, Hermione and Malfoy were aiming at him. This wasn’t real dueling, actually; it was tightly choreographed, designed to put on a good show. The outcome was predetermined. Parts of the exhibition would consist of real dueling, with the outcome unknown, but much of it would be carefully rehearsed and planned. After the duel he’d lost to Neville (which had been a better show, Harry thought, than the things they were thus far planning for the exhibition), he wanted to be seen *winning* a duel before the entire school. Ron was paired with him for one of the non-rehearsed duels, and Roger Davies for another. They’d pulled names out of a wizard’s hat to determine the pairings. Malfoy was matched with Niamh Quirke and Fred Weasley, and Hermione was taking on Alicia again, as well as George Weasley.

The following afternoon they went down to Hagrid’s to see the seventh-year Gryffindors go up against the sun bulls. After Angelina prepared George to harness the bulls and plow the ground, sowing the earth with dragon’s teeth, they both fought against the Chthonians that sprang from the soil, but they hadn’t done especially well in the Dueling Club, and Moody put a stop to it so that they could go to the hospital wing. (It was a combination test for Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts.) Moody caused the Chthonians to disappear, and waving his wand, Flitwick restored the plowed ground to its pristine state for Fred and his partner, Yarrow Swartz, a girl with a good reputation for brewing potions.

After drinking the potion Yarrow made him and charming himself with a protective shield, Fred harnessed the bulls and proceeded to do the plowing, as George had. This time, when the Chthonians sprang from the earth sown with dragons’ teeth, Fred and Yarrow beat them back, until the ground was littered with their white bones. Which was all the Chthonians were: fighting skeletons. Harry had at first been alarmed when they’d sprung from the earth to fight George and Angelina; the second time, he knew what to expect, and was gratified to see someone conquer them. He was very, very glad that his N.E.W.T.s were two years away...

Lee Jordan and Alicia Spinnet did better than George and Angelina, but not as well as Fred and Yarrow. Harry had his fist in his mouth when it seemed that one of the bulls was going to gore Lee...but Alicia hexed it before it could break skin. Harry pondered the fact that the twins performed so differently on the test. They seemed to be growing apart, a bit, or at least exhibiting different skills and talents. Fred was a far better dueler, for instance, while George was the one with a girlfriend (Fred and Susan Bones had opted to be “just friends” after the ceilidh).

As Friday approached, Harry grew tenser and tenser. Dueling practice did little to alleviate this; what he really wanted to do was to sneak off with Hermione to Fluffy's old lair, but he was starting to suspect that she was being superstitious about their physical relationship. After the first time, he'd found Neville, and after the second time, they'd wound up in the forest tied to trees, not knowing whether they'd survive another five minutes. He wondered whether she assumed it would be bad luck to be together again before they learned of their test results. It seemed uncharacteristic of her, and yet...she was definitely avoiding being alone with him. She went out of her way to make sure that Ron was with them at all times. She didn't refrain from touching him or even kissing him, but she also didn't suggest that they be alone or try to instigate it, as she had in the past. Harry was getting very, very frustrated.

Finally, at breakfast on Friday morning, even more owls than usually fluttered in the windows, most of them school owls. Every fifth-year student received a large creamy envelope with the Hogwarts seal. Seamus and Dean were pulling their envelopes down from the owls before they'd had time to alight on their shoulders, and Ron sat holding his, sweat breaking out on his brow as he hesitated to open it.

Harry finally had an envelope drop into his hands. *Harry Potter, Gryffindor*, it said simply in large, looping script. Harry was starting to open it when, beside him, Hermione started screaming, then practically choked him when she threw her arms around his neck. Harry gasped and gently took her arm away from his windpipe, then smiled at her.

"I'm guessing you're pretty happy with your results?"

She nodded, speechless, and handed him the letter. She'd received two O.W.L.s for Potions, both basic and intermediate; she also received both basic and intermediate O.W.L.s for Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy and History of Magic. She received one each for Herbology, Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures, and three for basic, intermediate and advanced Charms.

"Hermione," he breathed. "You've gotten--"

"I know!"

"*Sixteen* O.W.L.s--"

"I know!"

He stared at her letter again. She had set a school record. *No one*, not even Percy Weasley, had ever gotten sixteen O.W.L.s. He was half afraid to open his letter now. He thought of his nonexistent History of Magic test. There was a lump in his throat that would not go away. Hermione's scream had been the first, but now fifth-years all over the Great Hall were chattering loudly about their test results, running from table to table to talk to friends in other houses. Pandemonium ensued.

Then suddenly, he was being attacked by Ron. "Aaaah!" he cried, having finally opened his letter. "Eleven! I got eleven! Only one off from Percy and Bill!" Harry stared in disbelief at Ron's letter, thrust under his nose. Snape had actually given him an O.W.L. for basic Potions; he also had both basic and intermediate Transfiguration, Charms and Defense against the Dark Arts, and one O.W.L. each for Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, History of Magic and Herbology. The only one he'd missed was Astronomy, which was hardly a surprise in that they'd slept through virtually every class. Harry smiled uncertainly at him.

"That's great, Ron." He tried to look happy, he really did, then went back to staring at the envelope with his name written on it. Ron frowned at him.

"Haven't you opened yours yet?"

Harry thrust it at him. "I can't. You do it. Give it to me gently."

Harry clenched his jaw and grimaced while he watched Ron open the envelope and take out the letter. "Well," he began, "you didn't get History of Magic."

"That's probably because I slept through the test and didn't turn anything in."

"And you didn't get Astronomy. Ditto for Divination."

"Trelawney's hacked off at me for not revealing my 'Inner Eye' again. How bad is the rest of it?"

"Well, I hate to tell you this Harry, but you only got--*thirteen*."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What? Thirteen? How did I get thirteen?"

Ron laughed and handed him the letter. "Well, it probably helped that you got basic, intermediate *and* advanced for three subjects, Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. That's nine right there. And then Hagrid gave you one, and Sprout, and Snape gave you *two*, for basic and intermediate Potions. Getting to be quite the Snape-pet, aren't you? Who'd have thought, five years ago?"

Harry hit his arm with the back of his hand. "I'm not. I worked hard."

Hermione took his letter and examined it. "Well, see? It paid off." She was smiling at him and his letter, looking proud of him, but she was also still glowing from being very, very pleased with herself. Harry had never seen her quite so happy.

"How'd you do, Nev?" Ron said now to Neville, who was also smiling while looking at his letter.

"Nine," he said happily. "I missed Transfiguration and Charms. But I got one from everyone else, even Sinistra and Snape, and two from Professor Moody and Professor Sprout." He looked down at his letter again. "Gran will *not* believe this..."

Suddenly Harry's letter was plucked from his hands and he heard a familiar voice drawling, "All right, Potter, let's see how you've done..."

Harry waited for Malfoy to finish reading, trying to suppress the smile curling at the edges of his mouth and looking at Hermione merrily. Harry wished he had a camera when Malfoy finished. "How'd you do, Malfoy?" he asked, trying not to sound too smug. Malfoy grimaced, not speaking, thrusting his letter at Harry for inspection. He'd gotten basic and intermediate from Snape, McGonagall, Moody and Vector, and basic from Flitwick (who no doubt was taking points off for the burglar-alarm fiasco), Binns, Sprout and Sinistra. The only teacher who hadn't given him a single O.W.L. was Hagrid, and considering Malfoy's attitude in that class, as well as his performance, it was a miracle Hagrid hadn't found a way to give him a *negative* number of O.W.L.s.

"Pity, Malfoy," Harry said casually. "You only got twelve. Thought you said you'd get more than me..."

Malfoy continued to look at Harry's letter in disbelief. "And I *should* have. What's this 'advanced Transfiguration, advanced Charms, advanced Defense against the Dark Arts?'"

"You *know* about the Transfiguration..." Harry said under his breath. Malfoy nodded then.

"Oh, right. But these others...it sure pays to be the teachers' pet..."

"It also pays to be able to duel with Flitwick for more than an hour and to conjure a Patronus and block the pain of the Hara Kiri curse," Hermione informed him archly, with a smile at Harry. Malfoy still grimaced, then nimbly plucked Hermione's letter from her hand. His astonishment was even greater than when he'd seen Harry's letter, but now he found a way to turn the information to his advantage.

“So, Potter. Couldn’t outperform your girlfriend?”

Harry smiled and put his arm around her shoulder. “If we’re talking about *performance*, Malfoy...”

“I’m out of here...” he muttered, throwing the letter back at Hermione, who caught it in the air, laughing.

They were looking forward to going to Hogsmeade again the next day, though, even with Malfoy, and spent much of Friday lounging by the lake and chattering about the tests. Now that they were done, dissecting them in great detail seemed to be Hermione’s favorite pastime. Harry had to quiet her more than once with a kiss. The third time this happened, they were relaxing by the lake with Ron and Ginny and Malfoy and the twins and Angelina, who were done taking their N.E.W.T.s. Hermione held his head firmly, and Harry had the distinct impression that she’d been *trying* to get him to shut her up this time...

“Get a room!” Malfoy yelled irritably, throwing some leaves at them, as he sat next to Ginny, looking more than a little grumpy. He wouldn’t dare lay a lip on Ginny with her brothers around. Harry came up for air, smiling, then looked at Hermione searchingly.

“Sounds good to me. What do you think?” he said to her mischievously. She stood and immediately started walking toward the castle. He took that as a yes. As he turned to go, he caught Ron’s eye for a moment, and almost considered not following her. But then he turned to watch her walk toward the castle; none of them were wearing robes on this hot almost-summer day. She wore a pair of white shorts and a rather tight sleeveless blue blouse. His mouth went dry, watching her, and he forgot about Ron, running to catch her up. George and Angelina sent them off with wolf-whistles.

As they were about to enter the castle, walking hand-in-hand and grinning at each other, Hedwig came and landed on his shoulder, a parchment tied to her leg with Dudley’s handwriting on it. He thanked her, explaining that he didn’t have any owl treats, and she flew off to the owlery. He pocketed Dudley’s letter; he could read it later. They dashed up to Fluffy’s room, locking the door with multiple charms, putting a cushioning charm on the floor and attacking each other with abandon, the desires of the previous five weeks finally unleashed.

Afterward, she pillowed her head on his chest, watching his face in the flickering light of the candles they’d conjured, scattered around the room like a sea of fairy lights. “Harry?” she whispered.

He opened his eyes and found her looking at him. He smiled at how beautiful she was. “Yes?” “Dumbledore gave me some good news about my parents.”

“What is it?”

“They can come out of hiding. We’re going to be back in our old house this summer. He’s put the kind of protection charms on it that are on your house--you know, the Dursleys’ house. But we can’t go traveling like we normally do. We can leave the house, mind you, even go down to London for the day or--” she smiled at him “--I could come to visit you in Surrey. But we can’t leave England.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione...”

“No, Harry! I wasn’t trying to make you feel guilty or anything. I’ll just be so glad to see my mum and dad again. Do you know it’s been almost a *year*? When you’re an only child, you’re very close to your parents...” Then she stopped. “Oh, I’m sorry, Harry. Sometimes I have a terrible case of foot-in-mouth disease...”

He smiled and kissed her on the forehead. “Hermione. You can’t not mention your parents or

being close to them or missing them just because I'm an orphan. Frankly, I forget that there's any other way to live, now. I've never really known my parents. Seeing my mum and dad in the Pensieve...it was interesting, but they don't seem any more real to me now than before I saw them. It was like seeing actors on a stage. You love your parents and you're close to them and miss them. Don't be afraid to say those things to me, Hermione."

She smiled and snuggled up to him again. "You make me feel very lucky, do you know that Harry?"

He stroked her hair. "Feel like feeling even luckier--again?"

She lifted her head to smile at him, then moved to close the gap between their mouths as his hands caressed her back, then started moving further down...

* * * * *

They left after breakfast the next day to go to Hogsmeade. It was the first time since the ceilidh. When they reached the village, they were surprised by being greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Charlie and Percy outside the newly-rebuilt Three Broomsticks. Ron and Ginny and the twins were hugged and kissed by their mother (even the twins didn't seem to mind for a change) and O.W.L. results were discussed and praised, and N.E.W.T. results were speculated upon (they wouldn't know for five more days).

Harry didn't mind the Weasleys meeting them in Hogsmeade, but Ron seemed a bit discomfited by them suddenly turning up, as did Draco Malfoy. It seemed he couldn't be alone with Ginny ever, anymore; there were always other Weasleys somewhere in the vicinity. Mrs. Weasley was practically bouncing with excitement--Harry had never seen her like this--but Bill managed to explain what was going on a bit more coherently.

"We're here to celebrate too. Do you remember the jury saying that the Malfoy assets had to be liquidated and divided between the heirs of the six people he'd ordered killed? Of course, that's after paying the fines they levied on him as well. That meant two-thirds of what was left was to go to the heirs to the Clearwaters. Penelope and her little brother Jeremy didn't have wills, of course. And they were the chief beneficiaries named in their parents' will. But in the event that Penelope and Jeremy didn't survive their parents, last year, the Clearwaters added a codicil to their will naming an alternate heir."

Ron frowned. "Why are you telling us this?"

Bill nodded at Percy. "Percy's the heir. Apparently Penelope's parents were very keen on them getting married and assumed they would in a few years. They never thought anything would happen to them or their children, of course, but they put Percy's name in since they assumed he would soon be family anyway. So two-thirds of the proceeds from the liquidation will go to Percy. He's going to be bloody rich."

And yet, Harry couldn't help but think that Percy didn't look like he felt like celebrating. All the gold in the world couldn't bring back the girl he might have married. Harry caught his eye. He tried to smile, but it looked extremely half-hearted. Harry looked at Malfoy then, who looked utterly miserable. Harry gestured to Malfoy with his head, his eyes wide, as he looked back at Percy.

"Well, Bill," Percy said shakily. "I don't in particular *want* to be rich." Ron choked on his butterbeer, staring in disbelief at his brother. "I may put some of it away for the future...but I think a better use for it would be to set up a scholarship fund for Hogwarts students who might have trouble paying their school fees and buying supplies because their families have been killed or injured by Death Eaters...or similar reasons..."

Malfoy stared at Percy, whom Harry knew he'd never liked, especially when Percy was Head Boy. Percy looked back at him benignly, and Malfoy looked away. He was going to be even harder to help than Ron, Harry thought.

"Also," Bill continued, "Your thousand Galleons has been deposited in your vault at Gringotts, Harry, and you two," he said, nodding at Ron and Hermione, "now have Gringotts accounts, opened with your respective thousand Galleons. Don't spend it all at once!" he said with a grin. "And," he continued, "in honor of Perce becoming rich as Croesus, everything today is his treat..."

George and Fred enthusiastically endorsed this idea, while Harry noticed Ron leaning back and drinking his butterbeer, a look on his face that implied he was already envisioning what to do with his thousand Galleons...

They enjoyed themselves in the village all day, going to various shops, back to the pub for lunch, then having a leisurely walk back to the castle in the late afternoon, the sun still higher in the sky than it seemed it had any right to be. The day before had been midsummer, and Harry remembered that it was his parents' anniversary. He wondered whether he could convince Snape to put anything in the Pensieve from his parents' wedding--he'd been there, after all. Harry had seen him in the wedding photos. But then he thought about how his thoughts about them and Sirius and Remus had changed after seeing them in the Pensieve, and he decided against it. He could go look at the wedding pictures in the album Hagrid gave him, and imagine them dancing on the wooden floor laid down on the lawn outside the country inn called the Willows...he didn't need to jump into the Pensieve. He had a very vivid imagination; after all, he'd imagined being with Hermione countless times before it had actually happened...

He smiled at her as they walked back to the castle, remembering the previous afternoon. Lucius Malfoy was in prison; Percy had a windfall (even though he'd rather have had Penelope), Ron had a bank account for the first time, and Draco Malfoy didn't have to worry about money thanks to the scholarship Percy wanted to set up. They'd done well on their O.W.L.s. He didn't even mind going back to the Dursleys, he thought. Maybe he could contact Dick when he returned home and ask for a real job with him, for real pay, for the summer. He'd enjoy that, and he could continue to wear Sandy and chat with her when he liked. Despite the fact that Voldemort was still out there somewhere, as well as Wormtail, Harry had never felt quite so optimistic that everything would turn out all right.

As they neared the castle, though, Harry could see from a distance that Dumbledore was standing on the front steps with a large black dog. Harry got a very bad feeling upon seeing that, and he took his arm from around Hermione and started sprinting toward the headmaster, his well-trained legs now moving smoothly under him. It was tempting to just transfigure into his griffin form and fly to them, but he restrained himself. When he reached them, he stopped abruptly, breathing hard.

"What is it?" he gasped, bracing himself for the worst. But it was something he could never have expected.

"Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "I have some bad news for you. Please come to my office." Harry nodded dumbly, patting Sirius on the head. He trotted next to Harry, pressing comfortingly against his side. Harry looked over his shoulder at the others, still some distance away. Hermione looked like she wanted to run, too, but Ron put his hand on her arm and shook his head. He looked toward Harry. He looked like he too suspected what it was. Harry soon found out that they were both wrong.

He didn't remember how he reached Dumbledore's office. When he was sitting in a chair before his desk, Sirius changed to his human form again. Then Harry saw a beetle land on the floor, and suddenly standing before him was someone he hadn't seen in a year: Rita Skeeter. Dumbledore nodded at her and he sat.

"Harry--Rita here has been helping us keep tabs on your aunt and uncle and your cousin, between running some other errands now and again." Harry remembered the samples that had had to be collected to test for Krum's paternity. "Unfortunately, I neglected to tell her something important--and she was checking in on your aunt and uncle--"

"If I'd only *known* that he was *also* an unregistered Animagus..." she was saying in a slightly whiny tone to Dumbledore. "I'd have known to *say* something..."

Harry looked at Sirius. "She didn't know you were an unregistered Animagus? What does that have to do with anything?"

He frowned at Harry. "Not me, Harry. Wormtail. He turned up at Smeltings. One of teachers started keeping him as a pet, or some such thing, and then he was able to get at Dudley..."

Harry's heart was in his throat. "What happened?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry levelly. "He jumped off the roof of his dormitory. This morning. It looked like a suicide. We think he was under Imperius. Wormtail may be the one who put the curse on him. He's dead, Harry."

Tears pricked against his eyelids. "What? But--but we'd just become friends! He--he was all right, it turned out...we were writing to each other regularly..."

"And he never mentioned this rat with the silver paw?" Dumbledore wanted to know. Harry shook his head.

"He mentioned rats, yeah. But he said they were white rats, they were using them in their biology class. Behavior projects, mazes with cheese in them and all that. He never..." But then Harry remembered the letter he'd received from Dudley the day before, the letter he hadn't read.

Without another word to any of them, he ran from the office, down the spiral stairs, up to Gryffindor Tower. He ransacked the wardrobe, his trunk, trying to find every scrap of clothing he owned. *What had happened to the letter?* He found the pants he'd worn the previous day, when he and Hermione had gone up to Fluffy's room. The pockets were empty and there was a food stain on them from dinner the night before. The elves hadn't washed them yet. Harry went tearing out of the common room again and up to Fluffy's room. After yanking the door open, he lit his wand and stared around the dim chamber, then looked down and saw it, the rolled parchment with his own footprint on it, having trod on it before leaving, never noticing.... He picked it up, tears already flowing down his face as he unrolled it.

Dear Harry,

Thank god school's almost over! We can run together again, can't we, during the summer hols, right? I've lost a total of 120 pounds since September! You're not going to recognize me. Julia's going to come visit during the summer, and you can meet her. I never thought I'd have a girlfriend, and now I owe it all to you. Never thought I'd be saying that! Maybe I can convince mum and dad to treat you half-decent, or to actually do something for your birthday. I already have your gift. Hope you like it!

Even if I could make mum stop being so nasty to you, I suppose I could never convince her to let me have a pet rat though. Sounds unlikely, doesn't it? Remember how I said I thought my rat had gotten my roommate's rat preggers? They had some really cute little

white rat babies. Not bloody likely for her to let me, I know. Mr. Frankel, our biology teacher, has made a pet of this rat he found with a silver paw. Calls it a prognosis or something--

Prosthesis, Harry thought, remembering Hermione using the term in reference to Moody's leg. He wiped his eyes and continued reading.

--but I'm not sure what that means. Said he's never seen an animal that was apparently wild with anything like this. He didn't even keep it in a cage, but carried it around in the pocket of his lab coat. Frankel said it probably wasn't wild after all, probably someone's pet for a good long while. He still couldn't figure out how the silver paw was attached, though.

Maybe I can convince mum and dad to take us to Brighton for my birthday, even if they neglect yours. I'll insist that you come! They won't be able to get me to shut up until they say you can! Hope your tests went ok. See you soon.

--Dudley

Then Harry was crying freely as he leaned against the door and thought, If only I'd read it yesterday! If he had, he could have alerted Dumbledore and Sirius to the danger Dudley could be in, Sirius could have Apparated to Dudley's school, found Wormtail, kept him from putting Imperius on Dudley...

If he hadn't been in such a hurry to be with Hermione--if he'd only read it in time--

He curled up on the cold, stone floor, feeling like a murderer, crying until he could cry no more.

** * * * **

Harry skipped dinner. He staggered down to the common room later, a hollow ache in his chest. He kept throwing passwords at the Fat Lady, who kept refusing him entrance because none of them were the right one. He finally resorted to knocking, and Neville opened it for him, looking surprised. Harry didn't speak, walking toward the stairs to the dorm, not really seeing anything or anybody. He was vaguely aware of people looking at him strangely, but he didn't care. He was responsible, he thought. He could have stopped it. He couldn't have stopped the Westminster explosion, he knew that now. He couldn't have prevented the Clearwaters being killed, or Marcus Flint and his mother, or their houseguest. But he could have stopped this. He had as good as killed Dudley with his own two hands, Dudley who had become like a brother to him...

And then he stopped, remembering Trelawney's Tarot reading for the first time in months.

Another brother...And for him, at the hand of the traitor....

The Spectre of Death.

Had Trelawney actually made another accurate prediction? Harry was starting to wonder about her, about whether she just wanted them to think she was a sham most of the time. He remembered Snape telling his mum that a seeress had come up with the Prophecy...could it have been Trelawney? He swallowed. *At the hand of the traitor...* Wormtail's silver hand... "HARRY!" Ron yelled, Harry realized, for the fourth or fifth time. He'd been trudging up the stone steps listlessly, lost in his own thoughts. He turned to Ron, feeling like the world was moving in slow motion again, like when he'd left his body when Ron had put the Cruciatius Curse on him.

"What?"

"This came for you. A strange owl brought it." He handed Harry a small package, labeled, *H. Potter*. He opened it and took out a cassette tape. He frowned at it. Written on the small label

on the tape were the words *For the Boy Who Lived*.

Suddenly he was galvanized into action. He ran up to the dorm, he tore into his trunk, finding the tape player Dudley had given him. He checked the battery compartment; it still had the right sort, in the right position. He took the tape out that had been in the player and put in the tape he'd just received. He put on the earphones and hit play, but the same hissing, rushing noise met his ears that he'd heard before, when he'd tried to use it in the dormitory. He punched the STOP button angrily, then went down the stairs of the dorm again, his robes swirling behind him. As he strode through the common room, he was aware of multiple voices calling out to him; Hermione's, Ron's, Neville's...

He ignored them all, striding through the corridors up to the Astronomy Tower. He knew what he had to do. He looked down at the ground, so far below, wondering whether Dudley had felt any fear beneath the curse that compelled him to leap to his death. Had he stood on the roof, looking down, shaking with fear, and moving toward his doom anyway? Had he been able to form coherent thoughts of regret and apprehension as he fell toward the earth?

Harry swallowed and looked up at the sky instead. He put the tape player and headphones in his robe pockets, knowing that they would be there again when he changed back to human form again. Then he closed his eyes and felt the change move through him in an instant, as quick as thought, and he opened his eyes to find the world just as sunny and summery-bright, albeit with colors a little more muted because of his Animagus form. He spread his wings and leapt onto the wind, moving toward the village, toward a place hopefully far enough from Hogwarts that he could listen to the tape. As he flew over the village, he looked down, not surprised to see people looking up and pointing, exclaiming in surprise. He probably should have used his broom, he realized, but he wanted the feeling of flying, *really* flying under his own power, and he pushed on, flying a little beyond the village, landing next to a copse of alders, running into the shelter of the trees a little way before changing back, turning and looking toward the village, hoping no one would try to find where the anomalous golden griffin had set down.

He sat against a tree, taking the tape player out of his pocket and putting on the earphones. It was awkward to wear them at the same time as his glasses. He pressed play and watched the gears spinning, then heard the familiar hissing...then finally, a familiar voice. A voice he hadn't heard since Ron's birthday.

"Hello, Harry. I'm glad you've found a way to listen to this. I know how these things work because my mother was a Muggle. Did you know that? You probably didn't. My Master doesn't hold it against me, though. He is also a half-blood, and at least I'm no Mudblood. But I digress. I thought there were a few things you should know, now that you have heard of the death of your cousin.

"Yes, I killed him. You knew that, of course. You figured it out, at any rate. You're not a stupid boy. Lily's and James' boy would not be stupid. But are you smart enough to outsmart me? People have been underestimating me all my life, Harry. It gets tiresome, frankly. I have the ear of the Dark Lord. I have more power than the Minister of Magic, although *he* has the power to do things like suspend sentences and cut years in prison in half...especially when he's being blackmailed. But I digress again...

"I have been living at your cousin's school. It has been a very convenient place to avoid capture by the Ministry of Magic. You surprised me that night, Harry, when you changed into a lion and chased me through the forest. So, you've followed in your father's footsteps and become an illegal Animagus! I haven't told my Master yet...I think it is something I will save for just the right

moment. Don't worry; he will be pleased. For such a young wizard to achieve such a feat in such a short amount of time will merely show him again how powerful you are, and how powerful he can be when you are joined to him as his servant.

"One piece of information was not given to you on the night we were in the forest. Mr. Malfoy indicated that he had had his underlings put the Imperius Curse on those girls in the hopes that one of them might become your girlfriend...What we did not tell you was that a Congeniality Charm was also placed upon your cousin, such that he became a much more agreeable person. I understand you two became good friends, writing letters back and forth, running together when you were still at home. What a shame he's dead now..."

"You must understand that this WILL happen. You will become the servant of the Dark Lord and there is nothing you can do to stop it. Do not fight it any longer, Harry. I am sure you do not want anyone else close to you to die. A pity he was never really your friend...you just thought so..."

It seemed that there might be more, but Harry didn't care. He ripped off the headphones, threw them on the ground with the player and aimed an angry blast at them both with his wand, blowing them to bits. He didn't want it anymore. It was tainted. Tainted, like his friendship with Dudley...

A pity he was never really your friend...you just thought so...

He swallowed, staring at the bits of metal and plastic littering the ground. He'd been manipulated, completely manipulated. He felt as though he couldn't trust anything or anyone. What was real? Was his relationship with Hermione real? With Ron? Even with Malfoy? Had he really gotten thirteen O.W.L.s, or had he just imagined it? Was he really a prefect, captain of the Dueling Club? Nothing seemed to be real, he had no feeling of stability in his life any more... He walked back through the village on foot, then reached the castle well after dark. Since the day before had been the longest day of the year, that was saying something, as the sun was up exceptionally late in the evening now. He tried to bring himself to climb the marble stairs, but instead found that he was walking through the Great Hall, to the secret passage to Snape's office. Once in the dank passage at the foot of the stairs, he put his shoulder to the wall, finally feeling it give and pivot. Snape looked up from where he sat at his desk, a pile of graded parchments pushed to one side. He looked utterly unsurprised. Somehow, Harry knew that Snape knew about Dudley.

Harry pushed the wall back into place and stood, staring at the bottle of Ogden's Old Fire Whiskey that was on the desk. There was a glass with a small amount of the amber liquid sitting next to the bottle; Snape had been partaking after finishing his work for the evening. He took one look at Harry and opened a desk drawer, producing another identical glass. He picked up the bottle and poured until the glass was half-full. He was commiserating, in his way. Snape pushed it toward Harry. Harry nodded and picked up the glass, then sat in the wing chair by the empty fireplace. He stared at the glass for a minute before taking a sip. It burned his throat; he welcomed the pain. He deserved it. He took another sip, feeling more burning, then a numbness that started to creep into his brain. He wasn't sure how long it took him to finish it, but when it was gone, he felt thoroughly drunk. He wasn't used to this; he had a very low tolerance. He wouldn't even be sixteen for over a month, and Snape probably shouldn't have given it to him, but it was too late now. Perhaps the Potions master had a patented hangover formula he could give him in the morning...

Harry closed his eyes, leaning back in the wing chair, feeling sleep creep over him, and blissful

forgetfulness, although that would be strictly temporary. He was vaguely aware of Snape rising and leaving the room, first taking his glass from his limp hand and placing it on his desk with a solid-sounding *thunk*. He heard his professor leave the room, closing the door quietly, as he sank back into the chair, letting himself sink down into a dreamless slumber...

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty-Two With Drooping Wings

Harry heard a noise and he opened his eyes. He immediately closed them again; his neck hurt like hell from sleeping in the wing chair in Snape's office all night. His mouth tasted terrible from the whiskey, but his head felt oddly clear. He tried opening his eyes again and looked around the office; there was a dim light coming from somewhere, and looking up, Harry noticed for the first time the narrow clerestory windows at the top of the high wall behind Snape's desk, partially obscured by the objects sitting before the windows on the tops of the bookcases lining the wall. Bell jars, mason jars with pickled dragons' eyes and other creatures' body parts as well. The eerie color of the light was in part a result of the morning light being filtered through the contents of these containers. How cheery, thought Harry. It's no wonder Snape's always in such a sunny mood...

He grimaced. Snape. Snape was just the person to suit his disposition, now. He felt he would probably want to blast out of his way anyone even slightly more cheerful than Snape usually was. Harry understood now Malfoy's irritation with him that morning in the prefects' bathroom. Misery certainly does love company, he thought.

The door to the office suddenly opened, and Snape stood framed in the opening, regarding Harry with an inscrutable expression. He nodded a mute greeting to him and then gestured for Harry to follow him into the classroom. He rose and plodded after him, legs like lead. Snape stood at one of the ancient granite sinks in the corner of the room. He turned on the single tap for cold water and handed Harry a goblet. Harry looked down into it; the goblet was dark brown, and Harry could not tell what color the contents might be. He looked up at Snape, who nodded, and he took a deep breath and drank the contents of the goblet, remembering with a touch of irony the way he'd been appalled at Lupin for drinking the steaming potion Snape had brought him...

Harry felt dreadful; he immediately spat the contents of his mouth into the sink, where they swirled down the drain, helped along by the running water. Then he put his hand under the tap, cupping his hand to collect some water, which he brought quickly to his mouth, again and again, as when he'd been with the giants.

He brought the sleeve of his robes up to his mouth, looking at Snape. "*What was that?*" Snape gave him what passed for a smile. "Homemade mouthwash. Your mouth should taste better now." To his surprise, Harry found that he was right; there was a residual taste of ginger and mint.

"I thought it might be something for hangover..."

"Why? Do you feel like you have a hangover?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "No. Which is odd, because I felt like the whiskey really put me under, and I'm not used to drinking..."

"You no doubt fell asleep from pure stress. I have been watering my Ogden's for some time

now, to cut down on my intake. It is really not good for me, but...At any rate, what you had was actually about eighty per cent water. Even someone with no tolerance should not find that unwieldy.”

Harry nodded. “It probably *was* stress...But thanks for letting me stay down here.”

Snape nodded. “I told the headmaster and Professor McGonagall where you were, and not to worry. Where were you before that?”

Harry explained to him about having to get far enough from Hogwarts to use the tape player, the message from Wormtail. “I remember now; Hermione said that the wizards who abducted her in Bulgaria talked about doing something to a Muggle boy when he was still in his school last June...They were planning to kill him for a whole year!”

Snape looked utterly unsurprised. “I am afraid that there is very little you could tell me about Death Eaters that would shock me, Potter. Your godfather went to see your aunt and uncle; they were at your cousin’s school, summoned there because of the--tragedy. He should return soon.”

Harry nodded, still numb somehow. He almost wished he had really gotten drunk. No, he thought, what I *really* wish was that I’d read Dudley’s letter in time...if only...if only...

“You should go upstairs. It is too early for breakfast. Let your housemates know you are all right. Professor McGonagall told them not to worry about you, but I am sure they shall be glad to see you.” Harry’s throat felt very tight. Snape had never seemed so--nice. He almost wished he’d stop, that he’d yell at him or take house points away...

“And Potter,” he said then, a little stiffly. “You are a prefect. You know the rules.” Harry furrowed his brow, clueless about what he was going to say. “No leaving the grounds without permission. And I am *quite* certain that you should not have let anyone see a golden griffin flying over the village. I think it would be fair to say...twenty-five points from Gryffindor. I doubt Professor McGonagall would disagree with me.” Well, Harry thought, I got my wish. Although, for possibly the first time, he thought the points taken away were justified...

“Now,” Snape said even more sternly. “Sleep in my office all night *or* drink any more alcohol and it will be *fifty* points from Gryffindor.”

Harry restrained himself from smiling. “Yes, sir.”

Harry checked his watch as he slogged up the stairs. It was early, but not early enough to run. This was about the time he usually showered after running. Showering; that sounded like what he needed. He made his way to the prefects’ bathroom and almost didn’t see Hermione standing there waiting for him.

“Harry! Oh, Harry, I’ve been so worried, and Ron’s been worried, and Neville, and Ginny, and even Draco Malfoy...” She moved to enclose him in an embrace, and he recoiled and made a face as though he found her to be utterly repulsive. She cried, “Harry! What--”

“Don’t touch me!” he choked, trying to avoid coming in contact with her; he backed up against the opposite wall of the wide corridor, putting as much distance as possible between them.

“Never,” he said, and she looked stricken at his expression, “ever touch me again!”

He ran from her, going toward Gryffindor Tower. He heard her crying behind him, calling his name with tears in her voice, but he ignored her and kept moving forward, onward and upward. When he reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, he gave the password and entered, then crossed the common room and strode up the stairs to his dorm. He stood by his bed, shedding his clothes and putting his dressing gown on. Ron and the others still slept. He went to use the regular showers, to avoid going back to the prefects’ bathroom. No one would be in there at

this hour. After he had put his glasses in his dressing gown pocket and hung it on a hook, he stepped under the spray, leaning against the wall and just letting it hit him like a fire hose...his tears came pouring forth again, then, blending with the water from the showerhead, mixing in the drain as the water swirled around his feet. After a time, he stopped crying and put his hand up to clasp the basilisk amulet. He stared at the tiles on the opposite wall, holding the basilisk, and eventually, a feeling of calm pervaded him, and he reached out to turn off the water, feeling like his head was clear at last. He knew what he must do.

He dried off and put his dressing gown on again. When he returned to the dorm, Ron was sitting on the edge of his bed, and Hermione was sitting there with him, crying on his chest. Harry looked at the other beds; the three other boys had gone down to breakfast. Ron's arms were around Hermione; her own arms were crossed over her chest as she huddled against him like a child, tears wetting the T-shirt he wore with his pajama pants. He looked unspeakably sad as he gazed down at her, then up at Harry.

But Harry's calmness went flying out the window; he felt a wave of hostility roll through himself again at seeing her. "What's *she* doing here?" he said as hatefully as he could. It wasn't easy, but this was what had to be done...

Ron leaned down and whispered something to her and she nodded, then he kissed the top of her head. She stood and left without looking at Harry.

Harry didn't look at Ron; he went to the wardrobe to get some clothes. "Well, I'll bet you're happy..."

Ron screwed up his face in confusion. "*What?*"

"Not about Dudley. About me and Hermione. What you've been waiting for, isn't it?" Harry couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. Maybe that's what I should do, he thought.

Alienate everybody. If I don't have any friends, maybe Voldemort can't hold anything over my head...

Suddenly, Ron ran at him and threw him against the wall, his hands on his upper arms. Harry gasped with the shock of the impact, wincing at the pain emanating from where his head had struck the wall. He felt a sudden grudging respect for Malfoy for not crying out when Ron had done the same thing to him. Ron spoke with his face very close to Harry's.

"You don't know anything, Harry! What do you think we were doing up here? I'll tell you what: she was crying because you said you don't ever want her to touch you again! That's what.

What the hell is wrong with you? How can you blame *her* for this? This is *not* her fault, Harry.

You think you could have saved him from Wormtail, but if they really wanted it to happen...how could a Muggle be safe? Unless your aunt and uncle were to let Dumbledore bring him here? As if *that* would ever have happened. Don't you take this out on her! You *need* her right now, you can't afford to push her away. She *wants* to be there for you. Don't you think she feels terrible? She needs you to tell her it's all right, that she did nothing wrong, as much as you need to hear it, too. Don't be a sodding bastard to her, Harry. *She didn't kill Dudley*. No more did you."

Harry stared at Ron, amazed. He swallowed; he'd been very tense, but now he collapsed against the wall, and when Ron released him, he sank down onto his haunches. He nodded at Ron.

"You're right, of course. Damn you...I hate it when you're right..."

He looked up to see Ron smiling. "I'm still getting used to it, frankly. It's a weird feeling."

Harry tried to smile feebly back. "You can see a lot when you want to, Ron, you know that?"

After those essays you wrote for Moody...maybe you should go to Muggle university, become

an Oxford don, teach literature..."

Ron looked ill. "Nah. I can't wait to finish school. Muggles are gluttons for punishment, all those years cooped up in libraries...I want to get a job as soon as I walk out of the castle for the last time..."

Harry sat silently for a minute. Ron sat on his bed again. The silence wasn't uncomfortable; in fact, it was a pleasant, companionable silence. Oddly, it reminded Harry of sitting quietly with Snape in his office. Suddenly, Ron was moved to speak.

"Harry, at least--at least you and Dudley became friends before--you know--"

Harry shook his head. "But we didn't..." and he explained to Ron about the Congeniality Charm. Ron tried to offer explanations: maybe Wormtail was lying, just trying to upset Harry, maybe...But Harry told him about Hermione's recollections about being abducted, and he stopped talking, unable to reconcile these things.

"They made me care about him, Ron, just to take him away. How could anyone...how can a human being be so cruel..."

Ron sighed. "I'm not sure Death Eaters *are* human beings anymore, Harry. But this just goes to show, you really can't hold yourself responsible for Dudley. They were planning this for a *year*. A year, Harry. If you didn't do what You-Know-Who wanted, he was going to do this, any way that he could. If you caught Wormtail, someone else would have been sent to do it."

"But at least if I'd caught Wormtail, there'd be a chance of Sirius getting cleared..."

"Is that part of it? Wormtail got away *again*? You've got to stop obsessing over him, Harry. *Sirius* probably doesn't think about it as much as you do. I have to try really hard sometimes to forget that rat slept in the same *bed* with me. How do you think it makes me feel that he's doing the things he is now? And I never figured out that he was a wizard, not a stupid, sickly rat? He lived with us for twelve years. He knows more about my family than I'm really comfortable with a dark wizard knowing. And Percy...he used to be Percy's, remember. He and I were talking about Wormtail a little last summer, about some things we noticed about him that didn't make sense until we knew he was an Animagus. Percy feels guilty for never noticing, too. The thing is, Harry, some people are determined to do certain things, and as much as we'd all like to be onto them and stop them before they can hurt people...well, I have to work really hard sometimes not to blame myself for what happened to you after the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry swallowed. "I never blamed you for anything Wormtail did, Ron. You had no idea."

"Exactly. And don't blame yourself, or Hermione, for Dudley."

Ron put his hand out to Harry and he took it, pulling himself up. He didn't release Harry's hand right away. They gazed at each other, and Harry knew he was incredibly lucky to have Ron for his friend. He didn't want to alienate him--not that it seemed he could, even by saying quite despicable things to him. They each dressed and went down to the common room. Hermione was waiting for them there. She stood up from her armchair by the fire as Harry walked toward her, her bottom lip shaking. He strode purposefully toward her, then he was holding her in his arms, whispering into her hair, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," over and over, while she clung to him and said, "Yes, yes, it's all right..."

He finally kissed her on the forehead and separated from her, looking at Ron. "You should thank Ron for talking some sense into me," he told her, although he looked at his best friend. She smiled and stepped over to give Ron a hug, which Harry could see he took gratefully, closing his eyes, holding her tightly for a several seconds before letting her go with a reluctant look. Ron was perhaps not being completely honest about how he felt about Hermione, Harry

thought, but he was too good a person to want to get her by default...Ron steered her back toward Harry, smiling grimly at him.

"I can go, if you like. If there's other things you two want to say to each other..."

Harry looked at her; he felt they'd said everything, all that was necessary for now. She had accepted his apology and forgiven him. "No. We should go down for breakfast."

Ron frowned. "You're sure?"

Now Harry was perplexed. What more did Ron expect them to say? "Yeah, I'm sure. What's with you? Let's go." And Hermione opened the portrait for them all to scramble through, but Harry saw that Ron still looked bothered by something as they walked down the stairs to the Great Hall together, Harry holding one of Hermione's hands, and Ron the other.

* * * * *

After breakfast, Dumbledore asked Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny to come to his office. When they arrived in the round room with the portraits of the slumbering former headmasters and headmistresses, Harry was elated to see Sirius. His godfather gave him a crushing hug, then stepped back to look at him. He'd last seen him in person on the day of the ceilidh, but that seemed a long time ago now.

"You've grown up a lot this year, haven't you Harry?" he said quite seriously. Harry glanced toward Hermione and felt a warmth move up his face. Sirius laughed.

"I don't mean that...well, that's part of it, I suppose. Having a girlfriend." Harry glanced toward Dumbledore now, uncomfortable. He was still very glad that it was Aberforth and not his brother who had seen him and Hermione kissing outside the infirmary after Cho and Flitwick had woken up. Harry knew what Sirius meant; he had seen it himself, when he looked in his own eyes in the mirror. He still knew who he was when he closed his eyes, he could feel that entity that was *Harry*, his familiar, basically insecure but friendly self; but gazing out of his eyes now was a slightly haunted-looking Harry, a more serious Harry. He was also aware of losing most of the baby fat in his face, his cheekbones more pronounced and sharp now (which he thought made the shape of his face more like his mother's than his father's). He didn't look like the same person he'd been a year earlier, and he didn't feel like it either.

"Sirius has talked to your aunt and uncle about the funeral. It will be at St. Bede's in the Meadow Church, just outside Little Whinging, on Wednesday. The interment will be in the village cemetery just down the road."

"I offered my condolences to them," Sirius said to Harry. "They're very distraught..."

Harry's voice caught. "Do they know how he really died?" Harry didn't feel like mentioning the Congeniality Charm at this time.

"No. They think it was a suicide. They're blaming themselves...It's so sad, really. I never thought I could feel sorry for them, but all they could do practically the whole time I was there was to come up with yet another slight, something they'd said or done that might have driven him to it..."

Harry swallowed. So, he could tell them it was his fault, and they could hate him even more, or he could go on letting them think he'd killed himself and they'd done something to drive him to it. Neither was a particularly attractive choice.

"They wanted to know, Harry--are you planning to come to the funeral? They said they needed pallbearers...Actually, what they said was that if you come, you could make yourself useful for once and bring a couple of pallbearers, since they only have three...and you'd be one too, if you wanted."

Harry looked at Ron, who nodded. Then he looked at Sirius. "What about--"

He shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. I can't show my face. Too risky."

"Draco!" Ginny said suddenly. Harry turned to her.

"What?"

"Draco will do it. If I ask him, I'm sure he will. If it's all right for him to go, that is," she said uncertainly, looking at Dumbledore.

He smiled at her. "If Harry would like him to, then yes, Draco may go. In fact, you may all go; Harry will need his friends around him. Sirius has said that Remus Lupin has agreed to accompany you. I'll have a horseless carriage take you to Hogsmeade on Tuesday, and then you can go from Honeyduke's to Diagon Alley by floo. That will give you a day to shop for appropriate Muggle funeral clothes; you can stay over at the Leaky Cauldron before going to the funeral on Wednesday."

Harry frowned. "Floo? Then--why couldn't we have gone that way to the Ministry of Magic?" Dumbledore looked unconcerned about this oddity. "We could have. If I didn't think we all needed the buffer of the time on the train...sometimes, Harry, wizards and Muggles alike are so concerned with getting places quickly that they forget about the pleasures of something like a long, leisurely train ride. It's not jarring and sudden; you have time to adjust from one place to another. That's why we use it to bring you students to school. Well, that and it would be a bit messy for so many young witches and wizards and their belongings to be flowing out of the fireplaces in Hogsmeade all day long on September first." He smiled, his eyes twinkling at them all.

"On Wednesday, I'll have Ministry cars take you from the Leaky Cauldron to the church for the service. Are you familiar with it, Harry?"

"St. Bede's? A little; we went there for Christmas and Easter when I was young. The rector was nice, if it's the same one...It's a bit old fashioned. They still use the 1928 Book of Common Prayer..." What he didn't say was that Dudley had sung in the boys' choir, even doing soprano solos when he was young, before his voice changed. Aunt Petunia had been so proud...it didn't bear thinking about.

"Ah, yes. Well. Sirius has to leave, and you have to ask Draco if he will accompany you to London and the funeral." He nodded to them, and that was all; it was their cue to go. They left the office (Sirius came with them in his dog form) and walked down to the entrance hall, all four of them patting the large black dog affectionately before he went bounding down the path to Hogsmeade. Suddenly, Draco Malfoy came in the hall, carrying his broomstick over his shoulder. He looked like he'd gone for a morning fly around the pitch after breakfast. Ginny greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. He smiled at her and tried to give her a better-aimed kiss, but caught a look in Ron's eye and seemed to think better of it.

"Draco! I need to ask you--" she began.

"Hullo," he interrupted her, looking out the door and frowning. "Wasn't that the same dog we saw in Hogsmeade? On the day of the ceilidh?"

The four of them suddenly stood still, tongue-tied, staring back and forth at each other. Malfoy looked at each of them in turn. "What's the matter? Is that the password for making the four of you get the world's stupidest expressions on your faces? Oops--sorry Ginny, I meant three..." She smiled and laughed, recovering. "No, no--it might have been the same dog. I think it's just a stray the house elves have been feeding. You know how it is once you've fed them once; they keep coming back for more..." He nodded, accepting this. Ginny took a breath then, and said

quickly, “Draco, Harry’s cousin’s funeral is on Wednesday, so can you come along and be a pallbearer?”

He looked shocked. “What?”

Harry explained that three pallbearers were needed, and that they’d be going down to London first to shop for appropriate clothes, then going to Surrey the next day.

He shook his head, although he really did look reluctant. “Sorry, Potter. No.”

“Oh, come on, Malfoy, do the right thing for once,” Ron started to say, before Malfoy cut him off.

“Easy for you to say, Weasley. You *have* money now. I don’t have any way to actually *pay* for new clothes, thank you very much.”

Harry shrugged. “I wasn’t going to let anyone pay for their own anyway, Malfoy. It’s all on me. The rooms at the Cauldron, too.” He turned to Ron, to shut him up, as his mouth had started to open. “And I’m not taking no on that, from anyone. I’m not going to make you come to a funeral and not cover the clothes and rooms you wouldn’t have had to pay for if you hadn’t come.”

Ron closed his mouth again. Malfoy looked at him, then Harry, then at Ginny’s pleading face, which really seemed to be the clincher. “Well, as I seem to be confronted with the opportunity to spend the night at an inn where Ginny will be sleeping...” he started to say mischievously putting his arm around her shoulder and moving in for another kiss. Ron quickly disabused him of the notion he’d clearly started to entertain.

“Oh, no you don’t, Malfoy. You and I are sharing a room, and I’m keeping an eye on you. Or I could just put a binding spell on you, so you can’t leave the room overnight. Don’t get any ideas.”

Harry tried not to laugh; he couldn’t have imagined Ron wanting to spend the night in the same room with Malfoy before this, but with Ginny in another room in the same inn, Ron wasn’t going to be taking any chances.

Malfoy sighed, but he also still had the mischievous smile. “It is just too easy to get you wound up, you know that Weasley? All right; I’ll do it. Isn’t often one gets to go on an unsupervised field trip...”

“Well, actually, Remus Lupin’s supervising us,” Harry told him.

Malfoy looked thoughtful, then shrugged. “Oh, well, Lupin wasn’t so bad. As teachers go, he certainly wasn’t as bad as Lockhart. Or Quirrell. But--when’s the next full moon?”

“The last one was a week ago, Malfoy. I thought you got an O.W.L. in astronomy?” Hermione said a little snidely. He made a face at her; he still wasn’t quite over not getting more O.W.L.s than her or Harry, although he’d taken a couple of opportunities to point out to Ron that he’d gotten one more than *him*.

Tuesday seemed to come quickly. After breakfast, they five of them took small suitcases down to the entrance hall; Hermione had shown them a clever spell for transfiguring their rucksacks into the suitcases. “One can always have the right piece of luggage, if one only has a wand...”

“Don’t gloat, Granger,” Malfoy warned her, although he seemed pretty pleased with himself when the spell converted his canvas bag into a nice simple black leather suitcase to which he added his initials: DIM. Ron and Harry started to laugh when they saw that.

“Perfect initials, Malfoy. What’s the *I* stand for?” Ron chuckled.

“The *I* stands for I don’t want to tell you...”

“Do *you* know?” Ron tried to ask Ginny on the sly. She shook her head dumbly, but Harry

wasn't sure if she was being truthful or not.

They were quiet on the way to the village, then at Honeyduke's, they met Lupin, and one by one, they walked into the fireplace and announced that they wanted to go to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry hadn't used floo in a while; he'd forgotten about the dizzying array of gratings that would be whirling past him, glimpses of rooms throughout the wizarding world, until, just as he was starting to feel like he would lose his lunch, he tumbled out into the front room of the pub, tripping over his suitcase, and looking up into the kindly face of Tom the publican.

"Hello, Harry," he said calmly. Harry stood, brushing soot off the knees of his jeans. Hermione and Ginny were already standing at the foot of the stairs with their bags. Ron and Malfoy followed after, and then Lupin. Tom gave them their room keys and they all went up.

"How come you get a room to yourself, Potter?" Malfoy wanted to know as they went upstairs. Hermione and Ginny were sharing, like Malfoy and Ron. Lupin was also in a single room.

"Because I'm paying. Any other stupid questions?"

"Boys..." Lupin started to say.

"Sorry," Harry said to him. "Don't want to make you into a referee."

Lupin smiled at him. "Actually, it's like old times. We didn't even need Snape to be around to be picking on each other. I'd say something to Sirius, he'd say something to James..."

Malfoy stopped and stared at him. "Sirius? Sirius Black?"

They all froze. Lupin looked awful; Harry could tell he was mortified at having forgotten to watch what he said about Sirius.

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to get rid of the quaver in his voice. "You knew he was in my dad's crowd, surely? Everyone knew that."

Malfoy nodded, but Harry thought he was perhaps remembering the way Sirius had suddenly appeared at the Three Broomsticks on the day of the ceilidh. Had he noticed that he was wearing the same clothes as Ian Lucas? Had he wondered about the black dog? Harry wondered whether he'd ever trust Malfoy enough to tell him the truth about Sirius. Life would certainly be easier if he could. Of course, it would help if he could get Sirius cleared...

They went to their rooms and left their bags; they'd all worn Muggle clothes to floo to the Cauldron, so all they had to do was meet in the bar again before going to Diagon Alley. While Harry went to Gringotts to exchange Galleons for pounds, Lupin and the others went to Florean Fortescue's for ice cream. He gritted his teeth during the ride down to his vault, then waited, trying not to tap his foot, while the Goblin at the window upstairs determined how much of a surcharge he would pay for the currency conversion. When he finally emerged from the bank, he had a large wad of twenty-pound notes and enough in Galleons to pay Tom for the expenses at the inn. They went back to the Cauldron, but just as they were getting ready to open the street-side door, Harry realized that Lupin was going to go out into Muggle London in robes. They waited while he took his robes back to his room, returning in rather shabby brown pants and a brown shirt.

"My guard uniform," he mumbled with some embarrassment. Harry didn't know what to say. He still thought it a crime that Lupin had to support himself the way he did. They emerged into a bright, summery London day, looking, Harry thought, exactly like the six of them had spent the previous year in a dungeon. Which, considering how much time the five of them had put in working on potions, wasn't that far off. Harry hesitated, unsure of what to do next. Malfoy immediately picked up on this.

“What’s the matter, Potter? Never been in the big city before?”

“I’ve been to London before, Malfoy. I’m just not sure, um, where we should go...”

Hermione took charge. “Right,” she said, promptly hailing a taxi. A large black car rolled to a stop in front of them almost immediately. After they piled in, Hermione said firmly to the driver, “MacTavish’s, please.”

“Yes, miss,” said the elderly driver, moving out into the traffic as though there were no other possible destination for a person in London. After about fifteen minutes, they pulled up in front of a large store with doormen dressed in highland regalia, even more elaborate than that Malfoy had worn to the ceilidh.

“Um, Hermione,” Ron said nervously, “we’re not supposed to wear kilts for this funeral, are we? Because I have a basic philosophical problem with going about in a skirt...”

She nudged him with her elbow. “Stop panicking, Ron. They’re just for show, because the name of the place is Scottish. They sell your basic Muggle clothes, and they tailor men’s suits very quickly. My dad gets all of his suits here. And they have lovely silk ties...”

Harry paid the driver and they went into the store. Harry didn’t feel particularly comfortable here, but he didn’t want to reveal in front of Malfoy that he’d never been in a Muggle establishment like this, with posh fixtures, and immaculate young men and women who looked like they’d stepped out of glossy magazine adverts trying to squirt them with cologne or inquire every three seconds whether they needed any assistance at all, any at all...He noticed that Lupin didn’t look any more comfortable in this setting than he did.

Hermione went immediately to a bank of lifts and pressed the button to go up. When the doors opened, she and Harry and Lupin stepped on; Ron, Ginny and Malfoy just stood looking into the little room with mirrors and tartan wallpaper lining it. Their expressions were not just uncertain, but downright terrified. Even Malfoy wasn’t ashamed to show how he felt about this. Hermione sighed with exasperation.

“Come on, you three! It’s just a lift. Something that Muggles invented over a hundred years ago. Get on! Else we’ll have to walk up five storeys.”

Ginny put her foot into the lift experimentally, then crept in with her other foot, each step careful and tentative. Now Hermione was closing her eyes in exasperation; Harry could feel the heat of frustration emanating from her, like when she knew an answer in class and she was trying to restrain herself from screaming it out. Suddenly, the doors to the lift starting closing, and would have hit Ron if Harry hadn’t quickly found the button for opening them again. Ron screamed and leaped backward; he’d been about to board the lift, but when the doors had threatened to make a Ron snack out of him...

“Hurry up, you two!” Hermione hissed at them. “That happens when the doors have been open a long time. If you’d just get on...”

So Ron and Malfoy did a kind of kamikaze approach to the lift and leapt into it, each uttering a small cry, knocking into the rest of them and making the car shift slightly in the shaft, which was making *Harry* nervous now, and he’d never felt that way about lifts before. With a little more eye-rolling, Hermione punched the button for the fifth floor and the doors rolled smoothly shut. When the lift started moving upward, Malfoy suddenly grabbed Harry’s arm; Harry gave him an amused look and he removed his hand quickly. Harry noticed that he had beads of sweat on his forehead as he looked above the door at the numbers lighting up, one by one, as they passed the lower floors.

When the lift shuddered to a stop and the doors slid open, Ron and Malfoy shouldered their

way past the others, racing to get out. Ginny was actually laughing at the two of them as she strolled out with Hermione, suddenly an old veteran.

“I *liked* it!” she declared. “We should have those at school. I’m so tired of slogging up and down so many stairs...You’d think it wouldn’t be too hard to create a spell to--”

“Sssshh!” Hermione said suddenly, putting her hand over Ginny’s mouth. “Don’t mention spells or anything like that!” she hissed. Ginny glared at Hermione, who removed her hand from her mouth. “Sorry about that, but you can’t say things like that here...”

Lupin nodded. “One thing I’m here for is to keep you all out of any trouble of that sort.

Revealing or even discussing your--abilities--would be a serious breach.”

Ginny nodded at him, reluctantly admitting the truth of this. Harry realized that she and Ron and Malfoy had probably had very, very little exposure to the Muggle world; they just weren’t used to concealing something that was so second-nature to them. Harry and Hermione hadn’t even discovered they were magical until they received their Hogwarts letters (although, of course, there were the anomalous magical incidents from their childhoods). This was completely new for the others.

The rest of the shopping trip went fairly easily. The girls went off to look at appropriate funeral clothes for themselves while Lupin and the boys were fitted for suits and selected shirts and ties. Ron and Lupin also needed black oxfords. Malfoy was eyeing some expensive silk neckties, but Harry informed him they’d all be wearing plain black ties with their black suits.

When Malfoy was standing before a triple mirror in the suit he was getting, he squinted and stared at the mirror in an odd way, Harry thought. Finally, he stepped up to it and started rapping it with his knuckles. “Well? he said to his reflection. “What’s wrong with you?”

Harry walked over to him, standing very close. “Stop it, Malfoy! What’s wrong with *you* ?”

Malfoy still peered with a perplexed look into the mirror. “Stupid thing isn’t working...hasn’t said a word about whether this looks all right...”

“Malfoy,” he said more softly still. “Muggle mirrors don’t *talk*. ”

“They don’t?” He still stared at the mirror, his eyes narrowed.

“No.” Finally taking this for an answer, Malfoy walked away from the mirror, as though it had slighted him by not commenting. He probably has mirrors at home that feed his ego all the time, Harry thought.

The girls’ clothes were ready to go, but the suits were still being hemmed and altered by the middle of the afternoon. (Malfoy wanted to know why he couldn’t just use his wand for this back at the Leaky Cauldron; Harry nixed this idea.) They went up to the top floor (Ron and Malfoy weathering the lift better this time) to have a bite in the tea room there while they waited. They chose one of the tables on a roof terrace looking out over the neighborhood. On the streets below, the newly green trees fluttered in a warm breeze, and they could see children playing in a park with a tall iron fence around it. Nannies sat primly on benches, prams parked beside them, reading or chatting with each other. Office workers ate sandwiches on other benches and enjoyed the summer sunshine.

Harry listened to the others chatter around him with only half an ear; they were enjoying their outing, the unfamiliar setting, and he was glad he could do this for them. He, however, couldn’t help being constantly aware of the reason why they were here. The next morning, they would rise and don their newly-purchased, somber clothes, and go to the church for Dudley’s funeral...

Lupin caught his eye and nodded; he understood. It had been strange for Harry to see Lupin wearing a nicely-tailored suit; he’d only ever seen him in rather shabby robes, and now rather

shabby Muggle clothes. He had seemed very different, somehow. More authoritative, although Harry had never disrespected him when he was his teacher in third year. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

After their tea, they went back downstairs to retrieve the altered suits. Ginny and Hermione picked up their outfits in another department, where they'd been keeping their packages for them. Harry felt he'd had enough of the Muggle world for a while; he'd be immersed in it tomorrow, and then for the rest of the summer...

But he couldn't imagine the summer. Trying to live in the same house with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon while they mourned Dudley, and he knew it was all his fault. He dreaded seeing them at the funeral. Perhaps it would help that he'd been asked to provide pallbearers and he'd done just that. Harry didn't think they'd expect him to speak. He sincerely hoped not. He had no idea how he'd survive such a thing...

After they put their purchases in their rooms, they occupied themselves in the bar of the Leaky Cauldron before dinner. Ron challenged Malfoy to wizard chess, while Ginny and Remus watched them. Harry sat next to Hermione, his hand draped across her shoulder. She grew tired and put her head on his shoulder, then yawned hugely.

"Oh, Hermione, don't do that, you'll make me--" he began, before a yawn overcame him as well. She laughed, then kissed him on the cheek.

"I think I'll go take a nap in my room before dinner." She stood to go upstairs, but he still held her hand, looking at her hopefully.

"Would you like some company?"

She glanced over at Lupin, their chaperone, saying to Harry, "I really do want to sleep..."

"So do I. As you've said before, it's nice sleeping in the same bed..."

She nodded. "All right--" she answered, and they walked up the stairs; Harry looked over his shoulder; Lupin met his eye, but he nodded at Harry. Harry's chest hitched with emotion, treasuring the trust he felt from his father's old friend. He went with Hermione up to the room she shared with Ginny, following her to the bed. She lay down on her side in her clothes, and he put his glasses on the table and curled up behind her as they'd done many times. Very quickly, she was breathing slowly and regularly, her cheek on her hand in a way that always reminded him of a small child sleeping. He drew her to him, his arm around her waist, closing his eyes and letting his cares slip away...

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Harry felt someone watching him. He wasn't sure why or how he knew; he just did. His eyes flew open and he saw Ron sitting on Ginny's bed looking at the two of them. Except that he wasn't looking at Harry's face, so he didn't seem to be aware of the fact that his eyes were open. Harry remembered him watching Hermione sleep on the train.

"Ron," he said softly, not moving any other part of him.

"Ah!" Ron jumped, as startled as though a statue had spoken. Probably more startled, Harry thought, since the suits of armor and artwork and mirrors at Hogwarts addressed them all the time. Harry smiled as he remembered Malfoy trying to get the Muggle mirror to talk. "Harry--don't do that!"

"Sorry Ron; I wasn't *trying* to make you jump out of your skin..."

He rolled over onto his back, stretching, and then Hermione murmured something in her sleep and also rolled over, throwing her arm and one leg over Harry. Harry dared to glance back at Ron, looking at Hermione again; his heart was unmistakably on his face. Harry closed his eyes.

Just the other day, Ron had been yelling at him for trying to push Hermione away. Harry wondered now how much that had cost him.

“Don’t fall asleep again, Harry. It’s time for dinner. Lupin got us a private dining room downstairs. Everyone else is waiting.”

He woke Hermione and the three of them went down to dinner. Harry talked with the others, caught up with Lupin, told him quite a bit about the O.W.L.s, which gave the older man the chance to reminisce about his own fifth-year tests, then it was back to the bar for more wizard chess, Exploding Snap and wizard darts. The wizard darts were very frustrating to Harry, who’d never played before. The board looked at first like a regular dartboard in any pub; but the moment the dart (which spoke) was released, the board started changing and moving, so that it looked totally different by the time the small projectile reached it and embedded itself in the cork. Lupin was beating Harry mercilessly, but Ron gave Lupin a run for his money while Harry played Ginny at chess and Hermione and Malfoy laughed over their Snap burns. Ginny was going to win; his pieces were beating a hasty retreat before her onslaught. In no time, it seemed, she was saying, “Checkmate,” as Harry’s remaining knight and bishop were criticizing him, saying, “*We told you to move that pawn to protect the rook, which was protecting the king, but did you listen? No, you know what you’re doing, you said...*” Ginny smiled shyly at him as they cleared up the pieces. When they’d finished putting it away, Malfoy had started playing darts with Lupin and Ron while Hermione watched, highly amused, and Harry fetched some butterbeers from the bar for him and Ginny. They sat sipping them slowly, watching the darts match. Suddenly Ginny spoke softly to him.

“Harry. I know he probably hasn’t said anything to you, but--the Quidditch Cup. That meant a great deal to Draco. This has been so hard on him. You have no idea, the way he’s been treated in Slytherin since the trial, and of course, his mother...It was such a wonderful thing to do. He has a hard time saying these things, but he really appreciated it.”

Harry smiled at her. “It just came to me suddenly. The Snitch appearing when it did...I would have had to pretend I didn’t see it and try to draw Cho away too, so Ravenclaw wouldn’t win, and then hope that the next time it appeared, I’d get to it first. The moment I thought, *Hey, if I catch it now, we’ll tie Slytherin for the cup*, I also thought, *And that would be a bad thing why?* So before I could spend much more time thinking about it, I just went for it...”

“Well, it was still a wonderful thing to do. You and Draco may wind up friends yet.”

Harry looked at him, playing darts, laughing and joking with the others, sipping a butterbeer between his turns. Harry had never seen him like this, just socializing happily. “Yeah, well a greater wonder seems to be happening over there. Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley getting along. A truly miraculous event.”

Ginny sighed. “Now I just have five other brothers and my mum and dad to convince...” But then she smiled at Harry, and his chest felt strange; suddenly having her smile at him like that seemed so important and wonderful. He shook himself, looking over at Hermione, who was giving that throaty laugh he adored, which made her even more attractive than she already was... Harry and Ginny gave in and joined the darts match. At last, they all went up the stairs rather later than they should have, laughing and rehashing the hilarious results of their trying to play this game for the first time (except for Lupin). Harry kissed Hermione lightly on the lips and watched her close the door to her and Ginny’s room, then said goodnight to Ron, Malfoy and Lupin before retiring to his own room. He undressed and lay on the bed in his drawers, wondering how to conjure up a ceiling fan to dissipate the muggy heat from the room. He didn’t even have

a chance to take his glasses off, however, before his exhaustion and the oppressive heat caused him to fall asleep.

* * * * *

Harry awoke with a start. He was confused by the fact that the world was in focus, as it never was when he first awoke, until he realized that he'd fallen asleep with his glasses on. He wasn't sorry to wake up; he'd been having horrible nightmares, and he'd been *trying* to wake up for what felt like a long time. He drew his dressing gown around himself, tying the belt and taking his wand out of the pocket as he approached the door to his room. He took the locking charm off the door that he'd added as an extra precaution, then slowly turned the knob and pulled the door open a fraction of an inch, peering into the corridor to try to determine where the noise had come from.

An eye stared back at him.

But he knew whose eye it was. He opened the door wide enough for her to enter, and Hermione crept into his room. He closed the door again and she turned to him. "Did I wake you up, Harry?" she whispered. "I just thought--it was nice to take that nap earlier. If you wanted, I could just, you know, sleep here tonight..."

Harry stood with his back to the door, while she stepped toward him. He shook his head, remembering the dreams, not wanting to remember, trying to get the damn things out of his head...

"No, Harry? Oh. Well, all right, then. If you want to be alone, you should be alone..."

He swallowed and looked at her. "No. That wasn't what I meant. I mean--stay. But I don't just want to sleep."

She looked up at him, understanding now, sliding her arms up around his neck. He tipped her head back and bent over her, running his tongue along her bottom lip, shaking as she opened her lips and he felt her tongue meet his, as her fingers twined in his hair and he moved his hands to the belt of her dressing gown.

Somehow, he felt desperate, as though they didn't have much time, as though it were terribly important not to dawdle. He took care of removing the clothing from both of them, his hands moving quickly, surprising her, he could tell. While she glided languidly to the bed, he moved swiftly to his table, to put his glasses and amulet there. It seemed like he waited years for her to reach the bed. Once she was there, he continued to feel the strange urgency as he explored her, tried to make her feel that there wasn't a square inch of her skin untouched by his mouth and hands. Time and again, he heard gasps of surprise from her; but she seemed to think they were good surprises, and when she drew him to her, into her, and he finally felt that surge of electricity igniting all of his nerve endings, and heard her say his name over and over in a cried whisper, he saw the dreams again on the inside of his eyelids, and knew that even this hadn't been a solution. He had never felt like this with her before, like he was beating back death. The dreams would not be denied; they demanded his notice...

He stood on the flat roof of a nondescript brick building, Dudley beside him, smiling and talking, but the words made no sense to Harry. He was watching Dudley's mouth move, and he heard words, but the two didn't merge into a meaningful whole.

Harry looked around him; there was a fog obscuring the landscape around the building. Harry could not see any other buildings, or the ground at the bottom of the building they were on. He looked down the side of the building; the brick

walls disappeared into the fog, but Harry didn't get the impression that this meant they were very high up. The building didn't seem to be more than four storeys.

He looked at Dudley again, who was still talking at him unconcernedly. Harry wanted to say to him, 'Why are we on the roof? Let's go downstairs; I don't like it up here...'

But when Harry looked around, there was no door, nothing to indicate how they'd gotten to the roof. Harry saw a mob of white rats running along the ledge around the building a storey below the roof. There were hundreds, white fur and pink eyes and tails blurring, so that it was hard to tell where one of the animals began and another one left off. Then he saw it; the silver and brown amidst the pink and white. He lay on his stomach to reach down and catch it (he shouldn't have been able to reach it, but somehow he could), plucking it from the mass of moving white rodents, and then there it was; it was writhing in his hand, a silver paw sprouting incongruously from its small furry brown arm, the naked pink tail waving as though it could pick up things with it, like the prehensile tail of a monkey. He looked up at Dudley; it was as though Dudley could not see what he was doing, he went on talking, still out of sync, looking like a badly dubbed Japanese movie.

Harry tried to throw the rat off the roof in his fury, but as it left his grasp it was moving incredibly slowly, and Harry watched it change. In mid-air it metamorphosized into a large snake, its four limbs disappearing, its body lengthening and turning green, the pupils of its eyes becoming vertical, like a cat's. Then the snake, floating in the air next to the building (while Dudley continued his strange speech) continued to grow. Now it had limbs again, scaly green ones, now its head was changing shape, now it had sprouted wings and was using the wings to fly back and forth above Harry's and Dudley's heads. Harry watched the dragon with trepidation. Now the dragon was the one moving its mouth, but, unlike Dudley's words, what the dragon was saying was intelligible to Harry.

'You can trust me,' it drawled.

Harry stared at it, thinking, No. I can't.

'You can trust me,' it said to Dudley now. Still moving his lips ceaselessly, Dudley nodded and stepped up on the lip running around the roof of the building. Harry tried to stop him, but even though he was only five feet away, his movements seemed to be slower than slow; watching himself move was like watching the movements he'd seen when he had blocked the pain of the Cruciatus Curse in the forest. He could feel his feet moving, his legs pumping, he could see his hands reaching out for Dudley, but he could also see Dudley nodding calmly at the dragon and jumping from the ledge. Harry flailed and windmilled, trying to reach him. But by the time he arrived at the spot from which Dudley had jumped, his cousin was descending toward the fog. Harry, helpless, stared down at the fog shrouding the building, and then Dudley went through and could be seen no more...

The dream was the same every time. He looked down at her. For now, time seemed to be

moving along in the usual manner again. She was gazing up at him, her hands wrapped around his upper arms, her legs still binding him to her, a light sheen of sweat on her upper lip, her forehead, her neck and chest. She looked concerned, and he tried to reassure her, but he wasn't sure who was going to reassure *him*. He leaned down and kissed her neck, moving his mouth down, making her arch her back and smile at him. Distract her, arouse her again, do anything but fall asleep again...If I sleep I might dream...

Mustn't dream.

No more dreaming.

None.

But he fell into an exhausted heap next to her, staring up at the streetlights bouncing off the ceiling. She snuggled into the crook of his arm, having no idea of the horror he'd just seen, and he felt her breath upon his neck, her skin pressed against his, as he committed himself to never, ever sleeping again, and promptly broke his promise to himself in ten minutes, his eyes feeling welded shut and refusing to open...

* * * * *

He woke in the night, furious with himself that he'd let himself break his new vow of no-sleep already. He looked down at her. She lay beside him, her body shining and promising, and he lowered his lips to hers, coaxing her into consciousness, hoping she would help him stay awake again. He moved his mouth down to her neck, then her chest; he stroked his hands down her body until she could deny his movements no more, and her eyes flew open suddenly before being squeezed shut again, while she breathed, "Oh, Harry..."

There were worse ways to stay awake, he thought, as she came to life in his arms. When she whispered that she was feeling sticky and sweaty, he suggested they take a shower together; he hoped it would be harder to fall asleep, harder to have the dreams again. She smiled and pulled his mouth down to hers, to show she approved of the idea.

In the small shower in the bathroom adjoining his room, they soaped and explored each other some more, but Harry was feeling desperate again, feeling like it was dreadfully important that this work, that this make the dreams go away. The water beat against him, washing only his skin clean, leaving his soul still with a film that could not be removed.

He carried her back to the bed, her legs around his waist, trying to achieve forgetfulness and oblivion again...

When he was lying beside her once more, staring at the ceiling, struggling to keep his eyes open, listening to her even breathing, he finally gave in and closed his eyes, but when the images appeared on the insides of his eyelids they were different this time...

He was standing with Hermione in the garden at Godric's Hollow. He looked down at himself and Hermione; they were naked, but for some reason they were not trying to cover themselves. His mother was at the door of the cottage, holding a black-haired, green-eyed baby, pleading with Voldemort, falling on her knees, begging. Harry hadn't thought she could see him, but then she turned to him and said, 'I'm sorry Harry. I wanted to be there for you. I really did. We never meant for you do grow up without us...'

He looked back at her through his tears. 'Then,' he said, 'do something about it!' Suddenly, Snape was there behind her, coaching her, speaking softly to her. 'You don't have to mean it,' he said to her. 'Just say it. Do what you must. Save yourself, and Harry...'

She appeared not to have heard him, but she looked up at the menacing figure before her in the dark, hooded cloak, opening her mouth in a scream. 'Yes! Yes!' she cried through her tears. 'I will give him to you! I will raise him to be your servant! Please don't hurt him...'

Suddenly, the dark figure was gone, his mother and Snape was gone, the baby was gone. Harry turned to Hermione, still standing beside him, as lacking in clothes as he was.

But the girl wasn't Hermione.

'Ginny...' he breathed as he took her body in his arms, and she put her arms around him and brought his mouth to hers, then drew him down to the ground and pulled him on top of her.

'It will be all right...the scar is gone now...' she murmured between her kisses, her mouth on his chest, his arms, his neck, his face, and finally his forehead, where he could feel that the skin was now smooth and uninterrupted, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him to her...

But he blinked, and when next he looked, she too was gone, and he was lying prone on a skeleton. The bones collapsed beneath him, his face was next to the skull, and he rose up, screaming. He turned back to the cottage, but it was gone; he saw instead ruins, the ruins of the castle at Hogwarts. He had no doubt that's what it was. It looked as though it had been abandoned for a thousand years...He opened his mouth in a horrified cry:

'Mum! Mum! MUM!'

He opened his eyes. He'd been asleep for a while, having the same dream over and over, but only now did he cry out. The bright light of morning invaded the room. He felt his heart racing in his chest. Hermione was asleep beside him, having no idea what mental torture he was going through. She had pulled a sheet up over both of them at some point in the night; they were still both unclothed. Suddenly, Harry heard a voice crying, "*Alohomora !*" and the bang of the door hitting the wall as the spell flung it open violently. Harry realized he'd neglected to put the locking charm back on the door, so that it would be impervious to *Alohomora*. They must have heard him screaming, or Ginny had seen Hermione's empty bed and started worrying.

He saw the appalled faces of Ron, Draco and Ginny staring at them. Harry didn't know what to say; he was lying in bed with Hermione, neither of them wearing anything, and he'd been screaming. What had he been screaming? He couldn't remember. He looked at Ginny and tried to remember. She was there, but she hadn't been wearing anything either...

He tried to wipe this thought from his brain, swallowing and looking back at their shocked faces. He couldn't speak. Evidently, neither could they.

Beside him, Hermione stretched and started to sit up. Harry saw Ron's and Malfoy's eyes go wide, he turned and saw that she was no longer adequately covered by the sheet. He pushed her down again, pulling the sheet further up. She opened her eyes now, looking up at him sleepily.

"Hey, Harry, what's the big idea...?" Then she saw the others standing at the foot of the bed and promptly screamed.

Malfoy smirked.

"Good morning to you, too, Granger. Thanks for the news flash..."

Hermione pulled the sheet up over her *head*, unwilling to look at any of them after that. Harry

was pleased to see that Ginny was livid; she pointed at the door. "Out!" she commanded, and he immediately took in the frightening look on her face and obeyed without question. Now she was seeing his true colors, he thought. Harry looked at Ron, who was still wide-eyed.

"Ron? Could you--excuse us?"

He nodded dumbly, and Harry wasn't sure whether he'd actually blinked in the last five minutes. Perhaps he was afraid he'd miss another little show, thought Harry. Ron turned to go, still looking at the outline of Hermione under the sheet, taking far too much time for Harry's taste. Harry turned to try to talk to Hermione, when he realized that Ginny remained. Harry looked back at her; the sheet was around his waist, and he suddenly felt far more exposed than any of the times he'd gone about on the school grounds without a shirt. Ginny didn't seem to be quite conscious of the way she was gazing at him.

"Ginny?" He startled her. She widened her eyes and practically ran for the door, closing it loudly behind her. Now that the door was closed again, he looked down at Hermione. She had rolled over to lie on her stomach, and he could see that her face was quite red. "Oh my god," she was saying into the pillow. "Malfoy is *never* going to let me forget that, is he? I'm going to be hearing about rack of lamb from him for the next two years..."

Which was just what Harry needed to jerk him out of his stupor. He laughed suddenly, and leaned down to kiss her shoulder. She frowned at him. "Oh, it's funny, is it, that I just flashed Malfoy and Ginny and--" she swallowed "--Ron," she finished softly.

Well, Harry thought, Ron didn't exactly look like he *minded* ... But he didn't dare say it. She dressed and left the room, and he went into the bathroom and took another shower, trying to forget his nightmares. Today will be enough of a nightmare, he thought. He leaned against the wall while the water ran into the drain. He'd thought he could distract himself with her last night, but it hadn't worked. His brain had simply not cooperated. He hoped the others would not tell Lupin. He wondered whether Lupin knew anyway. Maybe he didn't care.

He put on his new suit and went down to the bar. Tom pointed down the corridor to the private dining room where they'd had dinner the night before. The others were there already, eating a quiet breakfast. Hermione had pulled her lengthened curls into a tight, uncompromising-looking French twist, her face looking very thin and exposed without the tangle of curls surrounding it as usual. She looked down at her plate, not daring to meet anyone's gaze, even Harry's. Harry saw Ginny looking at her in a distinctly unfriendly way. Oh great, thought Harry. We're off to a really great start today...

Malfoy, to his credit, was gazing longingly at Ginny, as though Hermione didn't exist. He sure had a hole to climb out of, Harry thought. But Ron...Ron couldn't take his eyes from Hermione. Which was odd, because she could not have chosen a sterner ensemble for the funeral. Her charcoal-grey suit was high-necked and the skirt fell to mid-calf. The color wasn't good for her, Harry thought; her normally lightly-tanned skin looked sallow, and she had dark circles under her eyes (from him waking her up in the night, he knew).

Ginny had pulled only some of her hair back, gathered with a barrette at her crown; most of it still cascaded onto her shoulders. Her pale skin looked translucent; Harry noticed a very pale blue vein near her hairline, found it hard to not look at it. She had a simple dress of the same charcoal-grey color as Hermione, but it was a far better choice for her. Suddenly he realized that she was looking back at him, frowning, and he looked down at his plate again. Good grief, he thought. It was going to be nearly impossible to have a conversation with any of them ever again...

When Lupin spoke, it was like a thunderclap. "The Ministry car will be here soon. We should get ready." His new suit hung perfectly on his slight frame, making Harry think of an accountant, sitting quietly in an office, adding columns of figures, except that he was hairier than most people probably wanted their accountants to be...

The Ministry car accommodated the six of them with ease, being far bigger inside than outside. The driver knew where to go, and the car slipped in between cars and trucks, moving in spaces that wouldn't have fit a bicycle, or, sometimes, a very thin stray cat. Harry stopped looking out the window; it was making him feel dizzy and ill. He looked at Hermione; she tried to smile at him, but the corners of her mouth didn't quite turn up enough for it to be a smile. He found himself turning to Malfoy then, and to his surprise, he found a look of sympathy there that was unexpected and without baggage.

When they arrived, the only person at the church was the vicar. Apparently the parish had fallen on hard times and could no longer afford a rector. To Harry's surprise, it was a quite young man who looked like he couldn't have been much older than Percy. How odd for this person to be in a position of authority. Mostly, he reminded Harry of Stan Shunpike, the conductor on the Knight Bus. He even had some acne, as though he were not quite done adolescence. He had sandy hair and hazel eyes, and thinking of this, Harry suddenly wished he'd brought Sandy with him instead of leaving her in Neville's care. He could have used someone else to talk to. He couldn't very well tell Hermione about his dreams, nor Ginny, Ron, Malfoy, Lupin...

They waited in an uncertain, irregular cluster by the lane, waiting for the hearse and the Dursleys. The vicar was named Mr. Babcock, and he tried to make small talk with Harry.

"So," he said, clearly uncomfortable. "Dudley was your cousin."

"Yes."

A long pause. He's terrible at this, Harry thought. "I don't think I've ever seen you at services."

"I've been at boarding school the last five years."

"Ah." Pause. Foot tapping. Staring at the sky. "You like your school?"

"Yes."

"Mmm....Do you do sports?"

"I'm the captain of the Dueling Club."

"Ah. Fencing. Yes. I quite liked 'The Three Musketeers.' I've seen many a Shakespeare production ruined by poor fencing. Yes..."

Harry knew he'd think this was what he meant; he couldn't correct him, of course. It gave the nervous young man something to babble about. He eventually exhausted his store of fencing references, however, and trailed off into silence once more.

They were finally saved when the hearse starting making its way down the lane from the village, followed by two long, dark cars. After the hearse stopped, Harry, Ron and Malfoy moved to the rear of the vehicle, waiting for their instructions. The first car behind the hearse stopped, but it was the car behind it which opened its doors, and Dudley's old friends emerged, the boys who, with Dudley, had chased Harry in the schoolyard when he was young. They looked odd; Harry realized he hadn't seen them in five years. He knew they recognized him and registered the surprise in their faces at the changes in his appearance. They nodded at each other. They were on the same team today.

A far too cheerful young woman in a black skirted suit stepped out of the passenger side of the hearse and walked to the back to brief the pallbearers. They would carry the coffin into the church now using the handles, but after, they would hoist it onto their shoulders and walk down

the lane to the cemetery, about an eighth of a mile. Did they all feel up to it? she wanted to know. The six of them all looked warily at each other, wizards and Muggles (although the Muggles didn't know they were confronted by wizards) and nodded, nobody wanting to show trepidation at the task ahead.

Ron leaned in to say to Harry, "She's the undertaker?" in a low voice. Harry shrugged.

"I suppose so. But I don't know that you should call her that. It might be mortician. Or funeral director. Or post-life planner, I don't know what they go by these days."

Ron smirked. "Hang in there, Harry. After all, you didn't have such a bad night, now did you?" Harry looked away from him. Ron thought the night had been all about pleasure; he had no idea of the horrific images he'd been trying to exorcise from his mind...

The six of them grasped the handles of the coffin, carrying it carefully down the flagstone path and in a side door to the sanctuary, then placed it on a table draped in black fabric which sat in front of the communion rail. An elderly woman Harry thought he recognized carried a spray of flowers into the sanctuary from the flower-arranging room between the parish house and the rectory--which he supposed might be called the vicarage now. She laid the spray across the closed coffin. The pallbearers sat then and waited for the rest of the congregation to arrive. Ron was to his right, Draco Malfoy to Ron's right. Hermione came into the church and sat on Harry's left, and Ginny sat to her left. Harry looked up at the dark rafters, the grey stone, the stained glass, remembering this place, remembering how much he had looked forward to Christmas and Easter every year because it was the closest he came to feeling like a normal person. When he was a child and they came here at the holidays, all of the children participated in the Easter Egg hunt, all of them received a gift at Christmas, even if it was just a small package of sweets. There was no discrimination, no thought of excluding him. Dudley always claimed Harry's Christmas package of sweets as well as his own, but Harry usually was able to nick a piece of candy from it before giving it up.

The memory of running down the middle aisle of the church, ducking into a pew box, trying to stop the swinging door from moving (they were quite high, more than thirty inches) so Dudley wouldn't know where he was....He would move the kneelers out of the way, the numerous cushions decorated on top by needlepoint covers executed by the army of little old ladies that used to populate the church; with these out of the way, he could hide his small, bony frame under the pew and wait for Dudley to give up. He was never clear on how he did it, but somehow, Dudley always managed to find him. And wrestle the candy away.

His throat grew tight as he remembered this. Yes, he thought. Remember those things, all the times growing up that I felt like I was just running, running, running from him all the time, bullied constantly...don't think about last summer, about the letters we'd exchanged, about being friends...remember the bad times...

He thought that it was a little odd that at these times, Dudley chasing Harry for the Christmas and Easter sweets, Harry never seemed to do any accidental magic. Perhaps it just didn't mean enough to him, and he knew Dudley wasn't trying to hurt him, he just really wanted the sweets...There were even times when he remembered rather enjoying the cat-and-mouse game, seeing what kind of ridiculous positions he could get Dudley into, luring him into places he never would have dreamed of going...He even managed to fit himself in between some of the large, square wooden organ pipes. Then when Dudley found him, Dudley got stuck between the pipes while Harry slipped out easily, then went to the organ console, pressing his foot down on one of the far left pedals, making a noise like a hundred foghorns emanate from the huge thirty-two-

foot pipe Dudley was pressed against. Dudley did a duet with the pipe, his scream summoning the entire vestry, who had been meeting in the front of the sanctuary. Harry had gotten in a great deal of trouble for that, everyone from the rector to the organist to his aunt and uncle were extremely irate, and Dudley's Easter suit had been ruined.

He couldn't stop the tears then, even in the midst of what should be bad memories, memories that should make him think *Good riddance, I'm better off, we're all better off, the world is better off*. But instead, he found himself thinking rather fondly of the amusement he'd been afforded the first time he saw Dudley in his Smeltings uniform, the sight of Dudley with the pig's tail, the inflated tongue after he'd pounced on the twins' toffee.

Dudley as he'd been before the Congeniality Charm deserved many things, Harry thought, but death just for being my cousin wasn't one of them. A handkerchief was suddenly thrust at him; he looked at Hermione, who had taken it out of her pocket and was giving it to him now. He nodded, taking off his glasses and wiping his eyes. She indicated that he should keep it, so he stuffed it in his pocket, giving her hand a small squeeze. Somehow he would get through this. The organist arrived and started playing something slow and mournful; the church started to fill up, and when Harry heard a familiar voice, he turned and saw his aunt and uncle, looking very pale and strained, and as though they hadn't slept since hearing of Dudley's supposed suicide. Harry wanted to get up and tell them that it wasn't their fault, that they hadn't driven him to kill himself, but he couldn't. His legs wouldn't move. After he heard Aunt Petunia raging at his mum, in the Pensieve, knowing that she hated his mother because she wouldn't use magic to save their mother...He just couldn't do it. He turned to the front again without meeting her eye, afraid that she would see his guilt, his culpability.

A number of Smeltings students had come; the church became a sea of teenagers, many of them sobbing girls. He struggled to maintain his composure again in the face of their tears. It was worse than the urge to yawn around other yawners. He wondered whether Dudley's popularity had come because of the Congeniality Charm or before that. He hadn't expected this, the number of people who would be in the little stone church, the number of lives that had been touched by this. Harry wondered for the first time who had found him, whether any of the other students had looked up and seen his body falling past their windows, the things that must have gone through their minds...

The service started, hushing the morbid thoughts rolling through Harry's head. The organ's drone ceased and the vicar stood, holding his prayer book, his Adam's apple bobbing as he spoke the familiar words.

"I am the resurrection and the life..."

Harry remembered the book he'd read in the library, about the first Lord Voldemort who'd tried to resurrect his son, and failed. He remembered Dumbledore saying that there wasn't a spell to bring someone back to life.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out...."

He tried to follow along in the prayer book, then realized that the vicar was using *The Order for the Burial of the Dead*, not *At the Burial of a Child*. He wondered whether his aunt and uncle had noticed the mistake.

"...let me know mine end, and the number of my days; that I may be certified how long I have to live...."

How long I have to live...that shouldn't have been in there, Harry thought. Dudley was only fifteen, not quite sixteen. He was still a child. Then he thought, am I still a child? He remembered

the strange feeling of being included with the adults in the conference in Madam Pomfrey's office, considering what was best for Neville...

...let me know mine end...

The vicar finished that psalm, then an olive-skinned boy stood and went to the front and read another, then a blond girl read the Twenty-Third Psalm...They had tears in their voices as they read, and Harry's throat felt almost blocked, so hard was he trying not to cry.

"...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me....Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me..."

The valley of the shadow of death.

I will fear no evil.

He clenched his jaw, thinking of the times he'd come close to death. Had Dudley been afraid? Would he? Of course, he couldn't be controlled by Imperius, he knew how to fight it. Had it really made Dudley commit suicide? Or had it simply removed his inhibitions, like Hermione? The crying blonde girl sat down. The organist was playing again, and the vicar announced the number of the hymn. The congregation stood, a very noisy affair, and sang their shaky off-pitch way through *Now the laborer's task is o'er*. Harry's throat wouldn't produce a note; he noted the name of the tune: *Requiescat*. Harry mentally added, *In pacem*.

Rest in peace.

Hermione had to tug at his jacket to get him to sit down again; he'd let his mind wander. He was vaguely aware then of the vicar reading a long passage from I Corinthians. He jerked his head up; the vicar had gotten his attention.

"All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body..."

Sown in corruption, raised in incorruption...perhaps that was why Marvolo hadn't been able to raise his son from the dead...he was sown in corruption and raised in corruption...

"...then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law."

The law. What law? Harry thought. The law that allows Fudge to practically pardon Lucius Malfoy? The wizarding laws that will probably never punish anyone for Dudley's murder?

"...remember thy servant Dudley Dursley, O Lord, according to the favour which thou bearest unto thy people, and grant that, increasing in knowledge and love of thee, he may go from strength to strength, in the life of perfect service..."

Harry stared up at the carved wooden screen hiding the organ console, willing Dudley to emerge from behind it, laughing and with a chocolate-smearred face. This had to be a nightmare, he kept telling himself, this couldn't have happened...

"...The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace, both

now and evermore. Amen.”

The organ started playing again. Harry’s eyes had been closed at the *amen*, now they flew open, hearing the music. He looked at Hermione. She nodded.

“*Suo Gan*,” he whispered. She squeezed his hand. A young boy, around ten years of age, had stood in the choir loft, alone. His pink face was freshly scrubbed, his light-brown hair curled innocently over his head, his blue eyes were pure as cornflowers. He lifted his flute-like voice above the organ’s accompaniment, the sound bouncing off the rafters and stone and plaster, the old lullaby’s Welsh words rolling around Harry’s brain with a comforting familiarity...

*Huna blentyn yn fy mynwes
.Clyd a chynnes ydyw hon
.Breichiau mam sy'n dyn am danat,
.Cariad mam sy dan fy mron
.Ni cha dim amharu'th gyntun
.Ni wna undyn â thi gam
.Huna'n dawel, anwyl blentyn
.Huna'n fwyn ar fron dy fam.
Huna'n dawel, heno, huna,
.Huna'n fwyn, y tlws ei lun
.Pam yr wyt yn awr yn gwenu,
.Gwenu'n dirion yn dy hun?
.Ai angylion fry sy'n gwenu
.Arnat ti yn gwenu'n llon
.Tithau'n gwenu'n ol dan huno
.Huno'n dawel ar fy mron?*

The young woman from the funeral home signaled to the pallbearers, and the six of them stood, marching neatly toward the casket. They hoisted it onto their shoulders; Harry was on the right, at the front. Malfoy was behind him, Ron behind Malfoy. Dudley’s friends were on the other side. Harry walked out of the church slowly, the heavy box cutting into his shoulder, the faces of the congregation imprinting themselves on his mind as the boy continued to sing the lullaby...

*Paid ag ofni, dim ond deilen
.Gura, gura ar y ddor
.Paid ag ofni, ton fach unig
.Sua, sua ar lan y mor
.Huna blentyn, nid oes yma
.Ddim i roddi iti fraw
.Gwena'n dawel yn fy mynwes
.Ar yr engyl gwynion draw.*

The aisle of the small church seemed to be miles long. Harry felt the texture of the rounded stones through the thin soles of his shoes; he tried to make as little noise as possible, so he could clearly hear the English words which the boy sang now...

*Sleep, my baby, on my bosom,
Warm and cozy, it will prove,
Round thee mother’s arms are folding,
In her heart a mother’s love.
There shall no one come to harm thee,*

*Naught shall ever break thy rest;
Sleep, my darling babe, in quiet,
Sleep on mother's gentle breast.
Sleep serenely, baby, slumber,
Lovely baby, gently sleep;
Tell me wherefore art thou smiling,
Smiling sweetly in thy sleep?
Do the angels smile in heaven
When thy happy smile they see?
Dost thou on them smile while slumb'ring
On my bosom peacefully.*

Harry could hear the organ continuing as they walked down the path to the lane, the six of them with their burden on their shoulders, the congregation following behind, led by the vicar and his aunt and uncle, he knew, although he could not turn to look. He had the perfect excuse for not looking at them. He was glad of that.

The lane was filled with the funeral procession. Harry wanted the walk to the grave to go on forever; he never wanted to reach that ominous pit, that final destination for this burden...

At the grave, they lowered the casket from their shoulders onto the boards that were lain across the open grave. The vicar took up a position next to it, while Harry and the other pallbearers backed off from the grave. Harry stood next to Hermione; she reached out and took his hand in hers. He saw that she'd been crying, her eyes red-rimmed.

"Man, that is born of a woman," Mr. Babcock read, "hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay....In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour...?"

Who indeed? thought Harry, thinking of the previous night, with Hermione. He had expected too much of her, he realized now. He shouldn't have expected her to be able to take away all of the guilt and self-recrimination he now suffered. There was no secret potion to remove it, no spell, no wave of a wand would do the trick...

Heavy pieces of webbing were passed under the coffin by somber, black-suited men from the funeral home. While they held the webbing, the young woman gestured for Ron and Harry and Malfoy to remove the supporting pieces of wood, and Dudley was lowered into the ground while the vicar finished speaking. Then she led him to his aunt and uncle; he tried not to look at their strained faces; Vernon stooped to the mound of earth that had been thrown up by the gravediggers, he took a fistful of soil and threw it half-heartedly onto the coffin. Aunt Petunia did the same, tears flowing down her face, then Harry stooped mechanically to scoop up some earth, shower the coffin with the dark soil. He watched it leave his hand, but some of it still stuck to his palm...

"...Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother Dudley, departed..."

Our brother, thought Harry.

"...and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

The vicar muttered something which induced the congregation to answer again, but Harry missed it, his mind wandering. Then he heard the words of the Kyrie being intoned, first by the vicar, then the people...Finally, he joined in on the Lord's Prayer, the familiar words not passing his lips for five years, some of the words giving him a great deal of trouble...

“And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil...”

Lead us not into temptation.

Deliver us from evil.

Evil. What did most of the people here know about evil? Harry wondered. He had seen evil. He had dueled with evil...

“...We give thee hearty thanks for the good examples of all those thy servants, who, having finished their course in faith, do now rest from their labours...”

Harry was annoyed. That’s what I need to do, he thought. Be annoyed. Be upset with the prayers this man who probably didn’t even know Dudley is standing there mindlessly reciting. From what labors was Dudley resting? He hadn’t been able to live long enough to *have* labors...Harry listened to him for a few more minutes, using this new tactic to survive, to keep from breaking down utterly, from falling to his knees and confessing before his aunt and uncle and a host of Muggles that Dudley had died because he was under the Imperius Curse, that it was because he was someone who had come to mean something to him and a dark wizard had used him...

“Amen.”

The final word at last. The vicar quietly walked away from the grave, leading the Dursleys and Harry, and Hermione and the others followed after, then the rest of the congregation slowly trickled away from the grave, while the gravediggers materialized seemingly from nowhere, and began to move the mound of earth into the long, rectangular hole. Harry could hear the earth hitting the wood, *thump! thump!* He couldn’t resist turning back to look. He stood still, letting the others flow past him, until he alone stood at the gate to the graveyard, watching the gravediggers work, doing their job, oblivious. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a large black dog up on a hill, standing near a small stone. He walked toward it, gladder to see that black dog than he thought was possible.

When he reached the dog, it didn’t change into a man, but Harry recognized him all the same. He patted him on the head, then sat down on the grass, ignoring the stains he would get on his new suit. Then he saw the grave marker.

JAMES GODRIC POTTER

1960-1981

LILY EVANS POTTER

1960-1981

Beloved parents and friends

RIP

Harry’s voice caught. He turned, and suddenly, Sirius was sitting beside him, his hands clasped around his knees like Harry.

“They’re *here*?” he asked. “There were here the whole time I was growing up, and I never knew?”

Sirius nodded. “Your aunt took care of it. There wasn’t actually a service. Remus told me about it last year. I’d never seen it either. Well, you know why. Remus doesn’t know who paid for the stone. Somehow, I don’t think it was your aunt. Look at the carving; that wasn’t done with a chisel. Too clean. That was done with a wand, with magic.”

Harry remembered Snape in the garden of the cottage at Godric’s Hollow, his mother’s body in his arms. It could have been Dumbledore, Harry supposed, but then again, it would be like

Snape to do it. Even more like him not to tell anyone.

“I mean,” he stammered, “I used to come running in here, into the graveyard, on the way home from school every day, when Dudley and his friends were chasing me. They were superstitious about coming in, so I knew I’d be safe. Somehow, I always felt safe here...”

Sirius put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “So maybe you did sense they were here after all, Harry. I’m sorry that this is the best I can do as far as being here for you today. I’m sorry for so much. I wish we could have done something to prevent this...”

Harry thought of the unread letter again and shook his head. “Don’t, Sirius. It’s not your fault.”

His godfather looked at him levelly. “It’s not your fault either, Harry. Please remember that.”

Harry looked up at him and nodded, not able to lie verbally to him. It would be an uphill battle, but he knew that he had to try, if only for his mental health. Wormtail wanted to paralyze him, he knew, anyway he knew how. He’d participated in putting Lucius Malfoy away, and still they thought they had the upper hand...

“I have to tell you something else, Harry.” Harry looked at him expectantly. “Avery and Nott were found--dead. The Dark Mark was over them. It seems that Malfoy had no trouble giving them up for two reasons. They hadn’t actually committed the murders he said they did, and they’d already been killed themselves for botching the Three Broomsticks, plus getting caught so easily.”

I did that, Harry thought. Moody and I caught them. And now they’re dead. Even if they were Death Eaters, they didn’t really hurt anyone that we know of...

“People are clamoring for Fudge to reinstate Malfoy’s suspended sentences, but he hasn’t done it,” Sirius went on. “So whoever killed the Clearwaters, and Mrs. Flint and her friend, is still out there. Plus--”

“There’s more?”

Sirius heaved a great sigh. “I’m afraid those jurors were right to be afraid. But they weren’t afraid enough. They did the right thing, but two of them have already paid for it. One’s dead. One’s in St. Mungo’s, the burn ward. You don’t want to know. And two others have received threats. It doesn’t look good, Harry. No one will want to be on a jury at a Death Eater trial at this rate. And the Daily Prophet is covering other Death Eater activities now. If anything, their audacity is worse than when Fudge was trying to hush it all up. They seem to have become publicity-mad. Now, I’m the last person to want to say that Fudge knows what he’s doing, but maybe--maybe he had the right idea after all. The wizarding world knows the danger now, but the Death Eaters also are able to throw their weight around now. Some appalling things have been happening...I won’t bother you with it now, Harry, but--things are sure to get worse before they get better. Remus and Mundungus Fletcher and I will be very busy this summer, I think, and Severus as well.”

Harry looked at him, appalled. “Summer! How can I face Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia all summer...”

Sirius shook his head. “I’m afraid you’ll have to, Harry. It’s the only safe place for you. Now more than ever. In fact, you should go back to the house now. For the wake. They’ll be wondering where you are. I can walk with you, if you like.”

Harry nodded, and Sirius became a dog again. They walked down to the gate to the graveyard, then along the lane, going back to Privet Drive. Harry liked walking along with Sirius in his dog form; there was no pressure for conversation, just the two of them keeping each other company, a simple togetherness. But Harry didn’t think; when he went through the front door of

the house and into the front hall, Sirius was still with him. He could hear the other mourners milling around in the living room and dining room. Hermione came to him, giving him a brief, gentle hug and handing him a cup of some kind of fruit punch. Lupin, Ron and Ginny looked at him morosely, but Draco Malfoy...

"It's that dog again!" he said with surprise. Harry looked down at Sirius.

"Um--" he stalled trying to think quickly. The four of them looked back and forth at each other nervously. Malfoy looked from one face to another, clearing waiting for someone to enlighten him. His face was getting angrier and angrier as he saw that no one was going to do this.

"Oh, fine!" he finally sneered bitterly. "I save your sorry arses," he pointed at Ron, Harry and Hermione, "get my own dad put in prison, I'm here at your cousin's funeral as a pallbearer, but you *still* don't think you can trust me. Fine! And people think Slytherins hold grudges..." He started to turn away toward the door (although where he thought he might go in Little Whinging was unclear). Ginny reached for his hand, pulling him back.

"It's not that..." Harry started to say, when Sirius-the-dog bounded up the stairs. "Hey!" he exclaimed, sprinting up the stairs after him. He heard the others following him.

The large black dog had entered his room and leapt on his bed, lying down comfortably as though he lived there, looking at Harry pointedly. *Tell him*, the look in his dark expressive eyes seemed to say. Harry sat down on the bed next to him, sighing wearily and idly petting the dog. Ron and Hermione stood uncertainly near his desk, and Ginny and Malfoy stood in the doorway, Malfoy having been dragged upstairs with her.

"Everybody in," Harry said. "Close the door." After they did this, Harry nodded at his desk chair. "Have a seat, Malfoy. It's kind of a long story..."

So he finally told him, with help from the others. The Fidelius Charm, Peter the traitor, the truth about the street of Muggles who were killed, Peter being Wormtail, Sirius and his dad and Peter all learning to become Animagi to accompany Remus Lupin when he was in his wolf form, what happened in the Shrieking Shack at the end of their third year, even how he and Hermione had helped Sirius escape from Flitwick's office...

Malfoy looked round at them all, as they each leapt in at different points, filling in bits of the story (Hermione was very proud of Crookshanks, and her narration made this clear). When they were done, Harry would have liked to capture the expression of utter amazement on Malfoy's face with a Muggle camera, so it would have been a still picture, no movement, a moment of frozen shock.

Suddenly, Sirius changed, and Malfoy stood up, knocking Harry's desk chair over. He was even paler than usual, virtually no difference between his skin and the white shirt he wore with his black suit. Sirius also stood and stepped toward Malfoy, his hand extended. Harry stood and smiled with perhaps too much pleasure at seeing Malfoy's reaction.

"Draco Malfoy," he said, "meet Sirius Black."

Sirius smiled his most charming smile and shook Malfoy's hand. "Nice to finally officially meet you, Draco."

Malfoy nodded dumbly; it appeared that even after hearing the whole saga, and knowing that the dog on the bed was Sirius Black, illegal Animagus and erstwhile denizen of Azkaban, he still didn't quite believe it. He started to sit down again, but Sirius kept hold of his hand until Ginny could scramble to right the chair he'd knocked over, then he let him sit.

"So you mean," he choked, finally regaining the power of speech, "that Wormtail is actually *your* stupid pet rat," he said, pointing at Ron, "and that he was the one who killed that street of

Muggles and betrayed Potter's parents..."

"Were you paying any attention at all, Malfoy?" Ron wanted to know, rolling his eyes.

"Yes, Weasley, but when you hear something which seems to be so obviously a fairy tale, and it turns out..."

"That it isn't?" Ginny smiled.

Malfoy swallowed and looked at Sirius again. "Yeah," he said softly.

Harry laughed, then thought, *Thank you, Malfoy. I didn't think I'd laugh today. Or ever again, for that matter...* "I wish," he said, "you could see your face, Malfoy."

Draco Malfoy grimaced. "I'm not here for your entertainment, Potter. I'm only here because Ginny asked me to...But it certainly has been informative."

Suddenly, there was a knock at Harry's bedroom door which made everyone jump, and Sirius abruptly changed back into a dog. They breathed a sigh of relief when they heard the voice that followed the knock.

"Harry? Are you in there?" Ginny was closest to the door, so she opened it to admit Remus Lupin. He closed the door behind himself and was clearly surprised to see the five teenagers clustered in the small room. Then he was startled to see the large black dog on the bed. Sirius changed into his human form and Lupin cried out, "What the hell are you doing! *He's* here!" indicating Draco Malfoy.

"He knows now, Remus," Sirius told him. Lupin gave a sigh of relief and looked at Malfoy.

"I suppose that's for the best...Actually I've got something to tell you too," he said to Malfoy, "but I hadn't had the chance before. It's about where you'll be this summer."

Malfoy jerked his head up. Harry had forgotten about Malfoy's problem. Well, he certainly couldn't stay with Sirius or Lupin or even Snape, if they were going to be busy working against the Death Eaters. Maybe Dumbledore would just let him stay at the school.

"The headmaster contacted your old nanny, and she's happy to have you stay with her for the summer."

"My nanny? I haven't seen her since I was four years old."

"Nevertheless, Dumbledore said she's heard about what you did and would be proud for you to stay with her. That suit you?" Malfoy nodded, obviously surprised. Lupin turned to Harry.

"Now, you, Harry...You'll be picked up at the train by your uncle and stay here for a few days, but then...they want to get away. Portugal or something. They don't want to hang about here all summer thinking about Dudley. You understand?"

Harry nodded. "And I take it I'm not going to Portugal?"

Lupin shook his head. "Of course not, Harry. Do you know what a security nightmare that would be for those of us trying to keep you safe?"

"So. I'm to stay here by myself?"

"No. Your aunt and uncle have already made arrangements for you to stay with your old babysitter, Mrs. Figg. They also say that someone named Dick has come round asking whether you want a summer job when you get back..."

Harry was torn between groaning about Mrs. Figg and being quite pleased about Dick. Well, if he was out working much of the day, he'd only have to deal with old Mrs. Figg in the evenings...that wouldn't be too bad. "That's all right, I suppose," he said. "I was hoping I could work for Dick. I was going to call him when I got back."

Lupin clapped his hands together. "Right! So that's you two sorted out. See? Not so hard. We should all go back downstairs. In about an hour, a Ministry car is coming to take us back to the

Leaky Cauldron so we can collect our things and return to Hogsmeade by floo. There's a pretty blonde girl down there who was looking for you, Harry. Said her name was Julia..."

Harry swallowed. Dudley's girlfriend. He never knew how he got through the rest of the wake, watching his aunt and uncle as the guests commiserated with them, listening while Julia told him how just the day before he died, she and Dudley had been making plans to see each other for the summer...

He was quite glad when the Ministry car arrived. He wanted nothing more than to be back at Hogwarts, even though it would only be for a few more days. There wasn't much of the term left now; just the Dueling Club Exhibition and the leaving feast. And then the long train ride back to London...

Before they left the doorway of Four Privet Drive, Malfoy stopped Harry and said quietly to him, "Thanks for finally telling me, Potter. About--what is the other name you were using? Snuffles? And--for the Quidditch Cup," he threw in quickly, then turned away from Harry and walked toward the car. Harry stood in the doorway, speechless. Well, wonder of wonders, he thought. Two thank yous from Draco Malfoy.

It had been a year of miracles indeed.

* * * * *

Epilogue Full Circle

On the last day of term, Harry, Hermione and Ron walked back to the castle after their morning run. Following breakfast, there would be the Dueling Club Exhibition, then the leaving feast, and the long train ride back to King's Cross. Harry could hardly believe that his fifth year was almost over, that he was almost sixteen. He thought of some of the other things that had occurred during the previous year--not least among them, Hermione--and shook his head in wonder as he walked.

They left her at the girls' prefects' bathroom, and Ron was going to leave Harry at the boys' bathroom and go up to Gryffindor tower, but Harry said, "Oh, come on, Ron; just use this one. It's early; no one's to know."

Ron looked up and down the corridor uncertainly, then after Harry gave the password, he followed him in. To say that Ron was floored by the opulence of the room would have been a gross understatement. Harry thought of the utilitarian white tile and simple candle-sconces lining the Gryffindor Tower bathrooms. He immediately wondered whether this was a mistake, another instance of his tactlessly rubbing Ron's nose in what he didn't have--in this case, regular access to a marble-lined Roman bath.

Then he thought it was a mistake for a different reason, as Ron's wondering gaze reached the tub, and the person lounging there, eyes closed. The Dark Mark was clearly visible on his left forearm and his upper arms were still decorated with purple-green bruises.

"Oi! Malfoy!" Draco Malfoy opened his eyes and screamed, "Weasley! Potter, what the hell is he doing in here? He's not a prefect!"

"Oh, stuff it Malfoy. Who cares what shower he uses? Mind your own business."

"This *is* my business. It's bad enough my personal sanctuary is invaded by *you* on a regular basis, but when it's also invaded by Weasley, I draw the line..."

Ron wasn't shaken up by this; he merely smirked at Malfoy. "What's the matter? Afraid I'll tell

my sister about any *physical inadequacies* you might have?"

Malfoy looked uncomfortable and shifted some bubbles in the water with his hands. "Great. Somehow, by being involved with your sister, I seem to have given you the idea I'm interested in *you*. Can't even take a simple bath without being leered at by Weasley. Or are you in here to see Potter? What about it Potter? Is there something the two of you should be telling Granger?" Harry walked to the showers, humming. "Only if you want us to tell *her* about your 'physical inadequacies,' too."

"I do *not* ..." Malfoy started to say, before realizing that he'd been tricked. Once he heard the showers turned on for both Harry and Ron, they heard him get out of the tub and pad over to the wardrobe where the bathrobes were kept. A little later they looked up to see him peering round the corner at them in Slytherin green.

"If you two like, I could tell *all* the girls in the school about *your* 'physical inad--'" Then he got a really good look at them and was speechless. When he finally found words again, all he could utter was a soft, "*Oh, shit.*"

Ron and Harry both threw back their heads and laughed. When they had finished their showers, they wrapped towels around themselves. Malfoy went to the door, trying to get in a last dig, "I am *so* going to whip your arses in the exhibition," he sneered at them before leaving. He slammed the door and they couldn't help laughing again. Well, Harry thought as he retrieved a deep red Gryffindor bathrobe and handed one to Ron as well; Malfoy hasn't lost his edge. It was comforting, somehow, like Snape taking house points away.

While they were walking back to Gryffindor Tower, Ron suddenly stopped. "Hey, Harry, what do you suppose Malfoy meant? I mean, he's not supposed to be going up against us. You're paired with me and Roger Davies, and he's paired with Niamh and Fred. He and Hermione and I are supposed to be going up against you alone, but that's one of the scripted bits."

Harry shrugged. "I think he just meant he was going to do better than us in the individual duels. He's beaten Niamh. But Fred's good; he'll have to work pretty hard to beat him. He and Yarrow were really impressive with the sun bulls and the Chthonians."

Ron shuddered. "Those things were..." Ron couldn't go on speaking and shuddered. "I am so glad we don't have to worry about that for two more years."

Harry nodded in agreement. The Chthonians made him remember the skeleton in his dream...and seeing Hogwarts in ruins. These images haunted him during his waking hours now, in addition to his sleeping ones, and he really didn't need Ron reminding him of the dueling skeletons.

They dressed for breakfast in their best robes. The exhibition would immediately follow. It was originally going to be on Wednesday, but Snape rescheduled it because of Dudley's funeral. Harry's stomach was starting to act up in anticipation; he could barely get down a bite of toast or a sip of juice. He watched Ron eat a bowl of porridge, two slices of toast slathered with butter and marmalade, five sausages and some kippers.

"Hungry much?" he asked Ron, feeling ill as he watched.

"Mmm?" Ron mumbled back at him, his mouth full. It seemed to be an effort for him to notice that anything in the universe existed outside of the food in front of him. "Wan' be bebaired," he said through a mouthful of porridge. Harry nodded, grimacing and leaning back in his seat, so he wouldn't be sprayed with food. You'd think it was a thirty-mile hike, he thought, not a dueling exhibition.

After breakfast, the entire population of the school advanced on the Quidditch pitch. The

spectators would have to stand round the edges of the pitch to watch the duelers in the center, since the stands were quite high up and designed for viewing people flying about in the air. The various duelers could stand at the edges and also watch, or wait in the Quidditch changing rooms, if they wished to continue to practice before they were slated to appear.

Harry went into the changing rooms and sat down on a bench, trying to steady his breathing. Why was he so nervous? He'd do fine. He was the captain. Flitwick had given him an advanced Charms O.W.L. for his dueling. Nothing to worry about.

He thought he was going to throw up.

Hermione sat next to him and put her arm about his shoulders. "Harry?" she said uncertainly, peering in his face. He seemed not to hear her at first, then he lifted his eyes to hers and gave a feeble smile.

"Fine. I mean, fine I'm. I mean, I'm fine."

She smiled. "Okay, whatever you say. It's a good thing we're going out there to duel and not recite Shakespeare soliloquies."

He grimaced at her. "That wouldn't be a problem. *Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, or that the Almighty had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter...*"

She frowned. "Did you have to choose something about suicide?"

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Oh. It just came out. I didn't think...but Dudley didn't really commit suicide, remember."

"I know. It's just..." She stopped and drew her lips into a line. "Nothing. We'll be up soon. Ready?"

He nodded. Roger and Evan Davies were standing nearby, and Draco Malfoy and Ginny stood together near the door, their arms around each other in a gentle embrace. Ron sat down near Harry and Hermione, clearly keeping an eye on his sister and Malfoy.

"We're next," Ron told Harry, not moving his eyes away from them as Ginny brushed her lips lightly against Malfoy's cheek. Harry turned now to look at them.

"...love you," he saw rather than heard Ginny say to him, she was speaking so quietly. Malfoy swallowed and brushed her hair out of her face.

"I love you so much," Harry heard him say very softly, then he kissed her quickly and lightly on the lips. He looked startled to turn and meet Harry's eyes. Then he frowned.

"Ready, Potter?" Harry swallowed and turned to Hermione, who was looking at him strangely. He turned back to Malfoy and nodded. This was the scripted exhibition, Harry against the three of them. Ron looked suspiciously at Malfoy.

"You're sure you remember what you're supposed to do, Malfoy?" he asked him.

Draco Malfoy gave a very unreassuring lopsided smile. "I know exactly what I'm going to do."

Harry thought, *I don't like that answer*, as the four of them exited the changing rooms. Ginny followed them out and took up a position on the edge of the pitch with the other spectators.

Snape stood in the center of the pitch. The spectators' applause for the previous duelers died down and Snape pointed his wand at his throat to announce the next combination.

"*Sonus*. Next," his magically magnified voice sounded around the pitch, "Harry Potter will face Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy in a three-on-one attack."

Snape pointed his wand at his throat again. "*Quietus*," he said, then moved to the perimeter of the pitch with the others.

Harry stood a little off from the center, where Snape had been, facing the goal posts nearest

him. Ron, Hermione and Malfoy were arrayed behind him. When practicing this, it had reminded him unnervingly of when Ron had been about to curse him in the forest, and Lucius Malfoy, his son and Wormtail had been behind Ron. He tried to put that out of his mind now. He knew just what was going to happen. It was all rehearsed.

Sandy hissed at him.

Uh oh, Harry thought. He didn't usually duel with Sandy on his arm, but he had forgotten to leave her by the fireplace in the common room before going down to breakfast; the fire wasn't usually lit now, since it was late June. Harry worried about what to do. He'd have to think fast; with any luck, those in the crowd who weren't in the Dueling Club and hadn't seen them rehearsing wouldn't know that anything was wrong.

Harry braced himself; he didn't want to start too soon. Malfoy, Ron and Hermione were supposed to hit him very quickly from behind with successive *Passus* Curses that--in theory--were supposed to give him pain in three parts of his body.

"*Gastro suo--*" he heard Hermione begin, and he began the process, the separation of mind and body...

"*Tracheo suo--*" Ron said a split second after her.

"*Capo suo--*" Draco Malfoy said almost as soon as Ron had spoken.

"*Passus est. Passus est. Passus est.*" All three had finished their curses, but Harry didn't feel a thing, floating above his body, turning to look at them, their wands connected to his body by crackling waves of light. Then he saw it, he saw the moment when Malfoy turned and broke the connection between his wand and Harry, when he turned and pointed his wand at Ron, who turned his head slowly in surprise as Harry watched Malfoy's lips move in an unheard curse, as the beam of light arced the short distance to Ron's body. Ron's wand broke the connection with Harry as Malfoy's curse struck him.

Hermione broke her connection with Harry now, turning to Malfoy, and Harry slid down into his body again, but before Hermione could get her curse out of her mouth, Malfoy had broken the connection between his wand and Ron, and pointed it at her instead, and the second that Harry was fully integrated again, he heard him cry, "*Impedimenta!*"

Now Hermione appeared to him to be moving even more slowly than when he had been in his separated state; so slowly that any movement was indiscernible. Harry had decided what to do. Originally, he was supposed to demonstrate a shielding charm that he could put upon himself, to allow him to continue to cast spells, but preventing people and most spells from penetrating from the outside and affecting him.

Instead, did something he remembered from the book Sirius had given him for his birthday.

Harry pointed his wand to his side, crying, "*Serpensortia!*" whereupon a snake began to emerge from the tip of his wand, growing more enormous by the second, until the spectators backed up from the pitch, nervous.

"Stop!" he hissed to it, and the huge serpent turned its head to look at him curiously. "You will obey me," he told it.

"Yessss," it answered him.

"Position yourself in a circle around those people," he hissed, pointing at Ron, Malfoy and Hermione, "and take your tail in your mouth."

The snake slithered to do his bidding. When Malfoy had put the Impediment Curse on Hermione, Ron had had to catch his breath for a moment. He clutched his throat (Malfoy had done *Tracheo suo* for the *Passus* Curse he'd put on Ron) and then turned his wand on Malfoy,

saying, “*Stupefy!*” as the snake surrounded them and put its tail in its mouth. Malfoy promptly fell down on the pitch, and that’s when Ron noticed that he was surrounded by an enormous snake’s body.

He looked with alarm at Harry; he knew that Harry was forced to improvise as much as he was, thanks to Malfoy throwing the script out, but suddenly he seemed to be much less sure of Harry than he was of Malfoy. Harry pointed at the Snake and cried, “*AEGIS!*”

A blue light sprang up from the snake’s body, a glowing column that extended far over Ron’s head, fading as it reached the clouds. The shield charm was now a prison charm, meaning that Harry could send spells into the blue column, but Ron could not send any out, or get out himself, although if he could find a rock and throw it (or some other inanimate object), that would go through. Ron hurled himself against the shield now, and his body stopped abruptly, as though he had struck a glass wall. Malfoy was on the ground beside him while Hermione stood nearby, also in the column, still moving with imperceptible slowness. Harry smiled at Ron, then pointed his wand toward the prisoners inside the snake’s circle.

“*Accio!*” he cried, and all three of their wands flew through the shield and propelled themselves into Harry’s outstretched hand. He turned to the spectators nearest him and smiled, holding his own wand in his outstretched right hand, the three other wands in his left.

He took a sweeping bow as the tumultuous applause started to move around the pitch. When he rose, he caught Snape’s eye. He wasn’t clapping, but he gave Harry a very small nod. Harry nodded back. He turned and pointed his wand, saying, “*Finite Incantatem!*”

The blue column of light and the snake disappeared. He walked to Hermione and took the Impediment Curse off her, then pointed his wand at Malfoy and said, “*Enervate!*”

Malfoy lifted his head, blinking and looking about with confusion. He saw Harry standing over him with a crooked smile, and sighed. Harry helped him to stand, then gave each of them their wands back. They took a bow together, all four of them, as the applause increased, and as they bowed, Malfoy muttered out of the side of his mouth, “Made it more interesting, didn’t I Potter?”

“That’s all you were trying to do?” Harry asked softly, unconvinced.

“Of course.” Malfoy’s smug grin was thoroughly unbelievable. Harry wondered again about trusting Malfoy. He can’t even do a simple dueling exhibition without ruining hours and hours of planning and practice, Harry thought. And now Malfoy knew about Sirius. Well, Sirius had sanctioned that. There wasn’t much Harry could have done to stop it..

When the applause died down, they all left the center of the pitch except for Malfoy, who was about to engage in a real duel with Niamh Quirke. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood near Ginny, who had her hands clasped together in front of her stomach. Her knuckles were white.

Harry watched the duel without really seeing it. Luckily, Sandy had told him what Malfoy was going to do, before he turned to attack Ron. Harry knew that having Sandy with him, predicting things, was perhaps not the most sporting thing to do, but he was glad now that he had not removed her from his arm before breakfast. Malfoy hadn’t exactly been sporting, either.

After several feints and some exchange of curses, Malfoy landed the disarming charm on Niamh, and she went flying backward into the crowd, her wand zooming into Malfoy’s hand.

As the people who had Niamh land on them helped her to stand, applause went round the pitch. Niamh and Malfoy returned to stand with the other spectators, Niamh near her brother and sister, Malfoy with Ginny, standing next to Ron and Hermione.

It was time for Harry and Ron to duel. Hermione turned to Harry and kissed him on the cheek.

“Good luck.” She stopped Ron from going and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek also. “Good luck,” she said again, more softly. Ron glanced at her, then Harry. He nodded at Harry. There was a strange look in Ron’s eyes.

They both advanced to the center of the pitch. After bowing, Ron promptly pointed his wand at him and cried, “*Apiarium!*” Immediately, Harry had the sensation of there being bees all over his body, crawling on every square inch, exposed and unexposed. He jumped; this was new. Ron had never done this before; indeed, Harry had never heard of the spell before.

Then the stinging began.

Harry cried out once. Then he clamped his jaw shut. He could do the pain blocking, but he decided to work through the pain instead, so he would be able to cast spells on Ron as well.

The unseen bees were starting to sting him in *very* sensitive places...

He pointed his wand at Ron, wincing as he cried, “*Otoexodus!*” He watched Ron’s bafflement as his hearing left him. Ron stared round at the cheering crowd, who, Harry knew, would now look to Ron like a television with the sound turned off. People moved their mouths, and yelled and shouted, but Ron could hear none of it. He wouldn’t be able to hear his own voice, or the spells that Harry was casting. Harry had made him temporarily deaf.

Ron and Harry circled each other now. There was a light in Ron’s eye that made Harry nervous. It reminded him of the way he had looked in the forest, when he’d been speaking so hatefully to him and Hermione. This, Harry thought, wasn’t just about dueling. This was about much more, and Ron had permission to do whatever he wanted, within reason. He was torn between letting Ron get it out of his system and protecting his own reputation as captain of the Dueling Club. Harry wished Sandy would say something, but he knew her Sight could not be forced, he couldn’t even ask her. If she had something to tell him, she would.

Harry twitched more than a little from the sensation of still being covered by stinging bees.

Sweat was running down into his eyes, and he blinked. His glasses were fogging a little; Ron appeared to be advancing on him through a cloud of mist. He dodged Ron’s curse, then Ron dodged one of his own. A few more exchanges like this occurred, and Harry remembered that Ron had been watching when he’d been dueling Flitwick. Taking notes, Ron? he thought, as he dodged another hex and sent an ankle-stabbing *Passus* Curse in Ron’s direction.

Ron went down on one knee, his face contorted in pain, his head bowed. Harry smiled. He would be all right. Ron was in a good deal of pain, and now he could just--

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Ron had pointed his wand at Harry suddenly, lifting his head. Harry had thought Ron was caught up in his pain, but knew he’d been a fool as he now he felt himself flying backwards, his wand leaving his hand, drawn to Ron like a magnet. Harry landed on the pitch, breaking his fall by throwing his hands behind him. He remembered Flitwick telling him the duel was a draw, then disarming him. He stood uncertainly after a moment, brushing grass off his robes (and still flinching from the bees). He walked back to Ron, who took the *Beehive Hex* off him, and Harry restored his hearing. They shook hands and turned to acknowledge the applause, but Harry couldn’t help notice where Ron’s eyes had gone.

Hermione looked at them both, smiling and laughing. Harry looked back at her, trying to smile. It wasn’t just that Ron had been more aggressive in the duel than Harry had ever seen him; he seemed to have as much to prove as the day they’d heard the Ravenclaws gossiping and he’d charged upstairs to Parvati....And now he could say he’d beaten Harry Potter, captain of the Dueling Club. Of course, some people would think that this was a choreographed duel, or that

Harry had thrown it so his best friend could win. In a way, he *had* won because he was Harry's friend, because Harry had paused to let him get his breath, where he might not have done that with someone else. Harry looked sideways at Ron, smiling at Hermione. He felt his stomach clench and remembered the way Ron had looked in the forest again. He was suddenly more worried about Ron than about Malfoy, and he didn't like feeling that way.

They moved to the perimeter to stand with Hermione and watch the others duel. In a little while Harry would go up against Roger Davies. Lovely, he thought. A Head Boy with something to prove. He had drawn some great dueling partners...

Hermione stood between them, short enough that Harry could look right over her head at Ron. Ron turned and met Harry's eyes. He suddenly looked very hostile. Then Ron looked down at Hermione, and his gaze softened; his eyes smiled.

Harry turned to watch the duels, knowing that his hardest fight lay ahead of him, and knowing that it would not be with Roger Davies, but with his best friend.

* * * * *

On the way back to the castle, Colin and Dennis Creevey were animatedly dissecting Harry's performance against Roger Davies (Harry had won) and the three attackers as well.

"And when the snake just *oozed* out of your wand..."

"And when you *hissed* at it..."

Harry grimaced and looked sideways at Will Flitwick, walking nearby. Colin and Dennis were one and two years behind him, still starstruck about The Great Harry Potter, while Harry felt that Will Flitwick, a full four years behind him, treated him like a normal person.

"Uncle Filius said you did really well on your Charms O.W.L.s, and that you'd dueled with him."

Harry frowned. "Who? Oh, Professor Flitwick. Yeah, he was pretty tough."

"I guess you wanted to give Ron a chance to win one, huh?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Something like that, yeah."

The leaving feast was waiting for them when they returned from the Quidditch pitch. Everyone was ravenous from standing about watching the dueling or participating. They filed into the Great Hall and went to their house tables, anxiously awaiting the news of who had won the House Cup. No one house had won the year before; the decorations on the walls had been black, in honor of Cedric. At least, Harry thought, none of the students had died this year. None of the students at this school, anyway. He thought of Dudley.

The food was already laid out on the tables, and everyone started heaping their plates with their favorite dishes. Ron started in on a large turkey drumstick as though he hadn't had a perfectly enormous breakfast before the dueling. Harry smiled at Hermione, and they both shook their heads over Ron. He seemed perfectly normal again, and Harry tried to put out of his mind the entity he now thought of as Dueling Ron.

Before moving off to the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy dramatically kissed Ginny's hand, while she looked at him with a glazed expression. Ron snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"What? Oh, Ron--" she said, flustered. Then she noticed his plate. "Oh my! Are you afraid mum and dad won't have any food when we get home? Because you could probably ask the house elves to pack you a picnic hamper for the train..." Ron looked at her, chewing. "Ver' fuh-ee."

Ginny laughed and sat next to him. After he chewed and swallowed, he looked at her very seriously. "Gin--I just want to know. Malfoy. He--treats you all right?"

She put her hand over his and patted it. “Yes, Ron. He treats me like a princess.” She smiled at him, then kissed his cheek. He actually recoiled slightly.

“What was that for?”

“Ron, you’re sixteen. Grow up! You were being sweet. Note the past tense. Sorry to alarm you...”

He went back to eating, but Harry noticed him looking surreptitiously at him and Hermione. Harry remembered the intensity of dueling with him. It had meant far more to Ron than to him. He was getting something out of his system by coming after him that way.

Finally, after the pudding, Dumbledore stood and everyone looked at him expectantly; they would finally find out who had won the House Cup. He gazed round the hall at them, his blue eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles and a gentle smile on his face.

He held a parchment before his face and peered at it. “Well! I am pleased to announce that this year, the House Cup goes to...”

“Excuse me, Headmaster,” Snape said suddenly, appearing at his elbow. “I have a deduction in house points to report. A student in Gryffindor left the school grounds without permission. I neglected to tell you before, but I have it right here.” He handed a small piece of parchment to Dumbledore.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione glared at Harry, who felt like disappearing under the pile of turkey bones on Ron’s plate. Dumbledore opened the folded slip of parchment and read, “Fifteen points from Gryffindor. Well, let’s see how that leaves us...”

Harry frowned, looking straight at Snape. He met Harry’s gaze, expressionless. *He’d taken twenty-five points away, not fifteen points. What was he up to?*

“Actually, that leaves us exactly where we already were! Gryffindor was twenty-five points ahead of Slytherin, and now they are ten points ahead. Gryffindor wins the House Cup! And now for the appropriate decor...”

He clapped his hands and the red-gold Gryffindor hangings showing a rampant lion rolled down the walls of the hall, warming the grey stone. He could have tied us for the House Cup, Harry thought. Like I did with the Quidditch Cup. But he didn’t. He could have taken away a few more points and won it for Slytherin, but he didn’t...

Harry’s throat felt tight. He looked at Snape. Snape looked back at Harry, expressionless. The Slytherins weren’t looking very happy, but the Gryffindor table was in an uproar, as palms slapped each other in the air and some couples kissed (a bit too enthusiastically for Professor McGonagall, who broke Lee and Katie apart with some well-aimed sparks).

Harry grinned at Hermione, Ron and Ginny, who looked floored. Dumbledore quietly waited for peace to return. “Congratulations, Gryffindors. Tying for the Quidditch Cup with Slytherin made it very close, but it’s my understanding that Professor Moody--” and he turned to the old Auror sitting near him “--received some especially fine essays from the fifth year class which warranted house points a number of times. You should be proud of yourselves.” Now Ron colored deeply, and Neville did too. They were the only ones to get points from Moody for their essays, and Ron received points more often than Neville. Dumbledore didn’t mention the three-hundred points they’d earned for their house because of the Lucius Malfoy affair. That had been a draw with Slytherin as well, as Draco Malfoy had received the same number of points afterward.

“And now, for some sadder news. At the end of last year, we mourned the death of Cedric Diggory. Fortunately no such tragedy has occurred this year to any Hogwarts student.

However, that does not mean that we here at Hogwarts have been untouched by the return of Voldemort, who was responsible for Cedric's death. A number of young people have recently been recruited to be Death Eaters, as you may know. Many of you here knew Penelope Clearwater and Marcus Flint, who completed their education here in recent years. Marcus was a fine Quidditch player. He also had the strength of character to say 'no' when his own father wished him to become a Death Eater. He and his mother are now dead. Penelope was a prefect in Ravenclaw here at Hogwarts and worked at Witch Weekly; she will be missed by many. Her family was also killed, including her brother Jeremy, who would have been in first year here at Hogwarts in September.

"Cedric was one of the first casualties in this war, for we are at war, I am sorry to say, and the Clearwaters and Flints will not be the last people we mourn, I fear. Some of you--especially those finishing your seventh year--may be approached to serve Voldemort. Penelope and Marcus were meant to be lessons, to show you what might happen if you refuse. I cannot tell you what to do; I think all here know what decision I would recommend if you were to find yourself in such a position. Just remember what you have learned here, and think about what is important to you. I have spoken before about choosing between what is right and what is easy. I am not here to preach. But I hope that if we have taught you anything, it is how to make sound decisions, to weigh the consequences of your actions, and to make well-considered sacrifices when necessary.

"That said, I ask you all now to stand and remember your former classmates, Penelope Clearwater and Marcus Flint."

The students stood as one and raised their goblets. Even every last Slytherin was standing, in honor of Flint. The names rumbled through the hall, and some Ravenclaws who hadn't heard about Penelope and her family were crying quietly, while the Scottish girl at the Slytherin table put her hand on Malfoy's arm, her eyes wet. Harry looked at Ginny. She hadn't seen. Well, Harry thought. We already know she's got nerve. She asked me out. Perhaps it doesn't bother her that Draco has a girlfriend. He's not interested anyway, Harry thought. He looked at Ginny again. If Malfoy hurt her, he'd...

"Harry!"

He looked around, confused. Hermione pulled at his robes to get him to sit. Everyone else had sat down again. He stopped worrying about Malfoy and the Scottish girl and drank some pumpkin juice. They socialized at the table for a little while longer; in half an hour, the horseless carriages would take them to the train. Suddenly, Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up into the contorted face of Mad Eye Moody.

"Potter," he said gruffly. "A word before you go."

Harry nodded and rose, followed Moody to the entrance hall, where house elves were still moving students' trunks into the carriages.

"Potter," he said again. "I didn't have a chance to give you my condolences on your cousin's death."

Harry hadn't expected this. "Oh. Um. Thank you." He knew he was being stupid and awkward, but he was caught totally off-guard. Moody seemed to be overlooking this, however. "It's hard. Losing a mate at your age. I know. I think I mentioned that I finished school in 1915?"

"Yes."

"Well, there was a war going on, and I had had enough of magic for a while--or so I thought--

so instead of looking for a job in the wizarding world, I signed up for the Muggle army. My best mate from home was going. He was a Muggle. I'm half and half. He knew from the time I got my Hogwarts letter that I was a wizard. I didn't spill it before then; even though some strange things had happened, I wasn't completely sure I wasn't a Squib until then. He never stopped being my friend. When he told me he was going into the army, at first we thought it would be Ireland. Pretty close by, blokes you're fighting also speak English. Not too bad. Not great, but there you go. If you had to pick a war, he thought--"

Moody looked out the front doors. "But he was sent to the Dardanelles. Gallipoli, in Turkey. I got myself sent, too, so I could be by his side and protect him. We were both eighteen. I knew it wasn't legal, of course, to be planning to help a Muggle with magic, interfering in a Muggle war. The Ministry would break my wand if they knew. But I wasn't planning to try to win the war for England; just protect my friend from harm. In the end, it didn't matter. I wasn't prepared for the trench warfare, for the mustard gas, for the commanding officers sending mere lads over the top running into machine-gun fire with nothing but effing bayonets..."

He sighed and his magical eye rolled around to look at Harry. His normal eye was still fixed on the road to Hogsmeade. "There was nothing I could do for him. I carried his body back to the trenches, so his parents could bury him properly. I hated the idea of him being out there on the battlefield, carrion birds circling overhead..." Moody shuddered. Harry swallowed, to think of something so horrible it made *Moody* react this way. "The Anzacs were much worse off than we were." He noted Harry's puzzlement and explained, "That's Australian and New Zealand troops. Horrible, horrible number of dead..."

"When I was back here in England I took his mum and dad some letters he'd written that never got posted. I didn't exactly get off scot-free either. A month after he died, my leg was amputated in a field hospital. I was pretty broken up about my mate; didn't much care about taking care of myself anymore. I'd cut my calf on a rusty piece of barbed wire, put a pain charm on it so it wouldn't hurt. Turned out that was the worst possible thing I could have done. If I could have felt the pain, I'd have known it was getting infected. Gangrene. No choice. It was amputated by a twenty-six year old Muggle doctor with a saw he'd poured rubbing alcohol on. I had no anesthesia. So I didn't lose my leg to dark wizards, as you might assume, but I did lose it to evil. Gallipoli is something I'll never forget." Harry remembered him talking about Gallipoli in class. Worse than decimation, he'd said. He knew firsthand.

Harry swallowed, watching the last of the trunks float into the horseless carriages. "I'm glad," he said throatily, "you came back to teach. I'm glad you recovered from--from what happened last year."

He nodded. His magical eye swiveled around to look at the road outside the door again. "Well, as I've just told you, I've been through worse. Not much worse, but worse. I'm afraid, Potter," he put his hand on Harry's shoulder again, "you are not out of the woods yet."

Harry grimaced. "I know. Just when everything seemed to be improving--Dudley."

"Well, you should have a summer that's all right. You'll be well looked-after."

Harry frowned. "How do you know? I'll just be with my old baby sitter."

He brought both of his eyes to focus on Harry. "You don't know?" He glanced into the Great Hall, then back at Harry. "Well, I don't see the harm in telling you. The Headmaster's having his brother check up on you. He doesn't mind the Muggle world, unlike many wizards. He's better at blending in than some of us, too." He smiled craggily at Harry. "In fact--they call the Headmaster a Muggle-lover, but his brother, well--he lives in the Muggle world all the time.

Hardly ever uses magic, except emergencies. Or like when he came here to teach in Flitwick's place. That's the real reason he's got such a bad reputation. He's got a philosophical problem with it. Doing magic, that is. Thinks it's an unfair advantage we have over Muggles."

"But--he never said anything when he was teaching us. And he was really good, too."

"It's not that he *can't* do magic. He's perfectly competent. He knew it wasn't his job to feed you propaganda. He's a good man, Aberforth Dumbledore. That goat thing was just a cover his brother made up for him, complete with the rumor that he might be illiterate. To take the focus off the real issue. He goes along with the joke, too. But even some folks you'd think would be fairly tolerant of this sort of thing are scandalized by it." Harry remembered Flitwick's reaction to Aberforth teaching his classes; he remembered that McGonagall and Sprout were also not Aberforth supporters.

"So that's it? He doesn't use magic, and that's why he's--"

"Persona non grata. Yep. There's some things some magical folk can't contemplate, like marrying Muggles or Muggle-borns. There's some who can't stand the idea of walking around in Muggle clothes, or going to Muggle stores...but almost all magical folk can't stomach the idea of a magical person who *won't use* his magic, just on *principle*. It just rubs 'em the wrong way."

Harry looked at him shrewdly. "It doesn't seem to bother you."

"No. It doesn't. You're looking at someone who decided at eighteen to go to Turkey to fight in a war I didn't understand because my best mate was going, and he was a Muggle. I don't hold anything against Aberforth Dumbledore. I like a man with principles, even when sticking to them makes his life harder than it has to be. He's one of the few people I truly admire in this world, Potter. I won't tell you who the others are. If I want to see you turn red, I'll get your girlfriend out here to kiss you."

He smiled again, and Harry felt himself redden anyway. The other students had started coming into the entrance hall from the Great Hall, and Harry extended his hand to the old Auror, who took it.

"Thank you, sir. It's been a privilege."

Moody nodded. "The pleasure's been all mine, Potter. All mine." He turned and hobbled up the marble stairs, one step at a time, while a sea of students surrounded Harry. Soon he was swept down the steps and into a carriage by Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Malfoy following closely behind. He tried to look back, to see Dumbledore, but he could not. He thought about Aberforth and his self-imposed exile from the wizarding world.

We must choose between what is right and what is easy.

Aberforth Dumbledore, like his brother, had made that choice, and had accepted the consequences of it. Harry felt himself, like Moody, admiring the renegade wizard with all his heart. And now he knew what he'd meant when he said he'd see Harry soon. He smiled in anticipation. Perhaps this would be a good summer after all.

* * * * *

Ron had claimed a compartment for the five of them. They sat as they had on the trip down to London for the trial, Harry and Hermione on one side, Ron, Ginny and Draco Malfoy on the other. They all tried to keep things light. They played card games. They played with the three cats (Crookshanks, Mackenzie and Argent). They needled each other (especially Ron and Malfoy--Ron swore he'd get back at Malfoy for that Passus Curse during the exhibition). They ate too many Chocolate Frogs and pumpkin pasties. And, as much as they professed to be

annoyed with each other over various things, they all seemed to feel a dread at the impending separation that would come when they arrived at King's Cross. Ron and Ginny would go back to the Burrow; Harry would go back to Surrey; Malfoy was being picked up by his former nanny; Hermione could go home and see her parents at last. But they wouldn't be together. As they neared London, Ginny was using her wand to heal some scratches Malfoy had received from Mackenzie. Harry was holding the black cat on his lap, rubbing her under the chin while she purred like a new car. Crookshanks slept on Hermione's lap and Argent on Ron's. Harry had tried to warn Malfoy about Mackenzie; not because Ginny's cat was known to be vicious, but because Sandy had said, "A cat will scratch a dragon." Possibly the least cryptic prediction she'd ever given Harry. He'd told Malfoy to be careful or he'd get scratched, and sure enough, he had. As a result, Harry was able to give Malfoy a smug I-told-you-so look, which he was rather enjoying.

While Ginny was still working on his hands, he looked at the four of them. "Well," he said. "You may thank me, Gryffindors."

They all frowned at him, Ginny included, as she finished putting the binding charms on his cat scratches. It really hadn't taken Sandy to predict his getting scratched. He wasn't at all a cat person.

"What for, Malfoy?" Ron wanted to know.

"I am why you won the House Cup."

Harry's jaw dropped a little; had he *told* Snape to do what he did?

Hermione made a face. "What did you do, break into McGonagall's office and get her to dock you a hundred house points?"

"No, but close. I took them away from my own housemates. Prefect's privilege."

Now all of their jaws had dropped open. "What?" Ron said.

Hermione added, "You didn't."

"What, Granger, you never took house points from anyone, in your house or out of it? Or you Potter?"

They shook their heads. He shook his head back at them, for a different reason. "You two had better toughen up. You probably saw *someone* doing something they should have been called on. I certainly--experienced enough." He sighed. "Ever since my dad's trial, most of the Slytherins have been such pricks...except for a couple of people. I expected some of that. But after a while, the shitty stunts they were pulling on me were getting tiresome. Turning my mattress into a bed of nails, taking my clothes before the house elves could get them and soaking them in itching potion, stealing my homework, transfiguring my texts into poisonous frogs--you name it. I got bloody tired of it. Every chance I got, every small infringement of the rules that I could catch someone in, I started taking away house points. I told them, all right, if they wanted Slytherin to lose the sodding House Cup, that was just fine with me. I'd take away house points until we were in negative numbers, if I had to. It took a while, but the harassment finally stopped. They figured out that I was serious. And Snape backed me up. Millicent Bulstrode did too. She even took some points away from people who were pulling stunts on me. I reckon Snape knew what he was doing making her a prefect. But there were still some things that happened where I never caught anyone..."

Ron actually looked concerned. "What are you going to do in September? You're just going to have to go back to Slytherin again."

"I'm going to owl some of the other Slytherin students this summer who I think were just going

along to go along. Try to find out who's with me...What I need is a block of allies in Slytherin. I don't seriously think everyone is from dark wizard families. I know Bulstrode isn't. And take Mariah, for instance..."

Ginny frowned. "Mariah? Mariah Kirkner?"

"Yeah. She's in your year. You have Potions and Care of Magical Creatures with Slytherin, right? She's got kinky black hair, skinny, pale."

"Yes, I know what she looks like..." Ginny said absently, looking at him.

"Well, she's all right. Older brother works at the Ministry. Her dad's at Sweetbriar Publishing and her mum's on staff at St. Mungo's. She's going to help me owl people. Try to get a feel for what camp everyone's in."

Harry nodded. So *that* was her name. Now that he'd heard the name, he was sure he'd heard it before.

"She's a pureblood, but her parents are actually kind of ashamed of it, or something. Her mum was in Slytherin when she was in school, but her dad was in Ravenclaw, and so was her brother. She says her mum says the women in their family have always been devious and ambitious." He paused, looking at their impassive faces. "It's a joke."

They smiled feebly at him. Ginny's smile was feeblest of all. Harry remembered the times she'd been disturbed by Malfoy's attentions to Hermione; now she seemed equally disturbed about Mariah Kirkner.

"Well," Harry said to him, "don't go overboard taking house points away from Slytherin next year. We're going to win the House Cup again, but it won't be by default."

"Oh really? How close was it this year?"

"Ten points."

"Want to know how many points I took from Slytherin? It was a hell of a lot more than ten. As I said, you may thank me."

They looked back and forth at each other, then said in unison, "THANK YOU!" before breaking up into laughter.

They chatted innocuously during the rest of the ride back to London, trying not to think about parting. As the train pulled into King's Cross, they all looked at each other wistfully. They'd been through so much together during the previous year, weathered so many changes in themselves and their relationships. If possible, they'd become even more important to each other. Harry thought fleetingly again of the wisdom of his having friends at all...but then he thought about not having friends. He remembered the young Tom Riddle, from the diary. A handsome and charming boy, bright and quick. But did he have friends? Not that Harry had seen, when he had entered the diary. It used to worry Harry that Percy was like that, so dedicated to being Head Boy, then a perfect Ministry lackey...but although he didn't have a slew of friends, he had his family, to which he was devoted. He'd had the love of Penelope Clearwater, and her parents as well, who had clearly been looking forward to welcoming him into the family. He worried about Percy now, but not because he thought he might become dark. Not anymore. He worried about Percy spiraling downward in despair, now that Penelope was gone. He had already asked Ron and Ginny to be especially nice to him over the summer, to not let him isolate himself too much and wallow. Yes, he would need to mourn, but he shouldn't cut himself off from his family. He needed them.

And of course, Harry realized, he needed his friends. As tempting as it was to cut them off and say that they'd be better off without the danger of being his friends, he knew he couldn't do

that. Even Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, a friend, he thought in wonderment. But it seemed to have happened. He remembered the small eleven-year-old boy chatting him up in Madam Malkin's robe shop, not realizing that he was *the* Harry Potter. He remembered talking to him on his first train ride to Hogwarts, trying to warn him about associating with "the wrong sort" of people. Harry smiled to himself; now he was seeing Ron's sister. Perhaps he'd really been trying to make friends with Harry, and just didn't know how. He remembered him saying in Arthur Weasley's office that he'd never had a friend, not really. Like Tom Riddle. Like the young Severus Snape, supposed vampire.

Harry thought of dueling with Malfoy again, and shuddered; he was becoming a very powerful wizard, he even knew how to Apparate already (which he was *not* supposed to do again for another year, when he would be of age and could apply for a proper license). He was glad that Ginny was such a good influence on him. He thought of the two of them behind Hagrid's hut again, how intense that had been, the way she had responded to his touch...He shook his head, to clear it. He hoped Malfoy wouldn't pressure her too much, wouldn't make her push him away. He also hoped she *would* continue to resist his advances...No, no. He tried yet again to clear his head. He had no business hoping that. He had Hermione, and he wasn't Ginny's brother, not truly. She had plenty of brothers.

The train had come to a full stop. Then they were on the platform, having collected their trunks. They were standing about, staring at one another while a maelstrom of people swirled around them. Saying goodbye was so hard...Finally, Hermione put her arms around Ron, who reciprocated, and she kissed his cheek quickly.

"Have a good summer," she said with wet, shining eyes. He stepped back from her, nodding mutely.

Then he turned to Harry. Ron swallowed. "Bye, Harry. I--what I mean is--"

Harry nodded. "Yeah." And he stepped forward and, for the first time, hugged his best friend. He did it quickly, and when he stepped back, he could see the emotion on Ron's face. Ron was the best friend anyone could have, and Harry had spent the better part of the previous year lying to him...he never wanted to do that again. He knew that technically, Ron forgave him, but the memory of that deception would always be with them. And then there was the memory of things said and done in the Forbidden Forest, and the look on Ron's face during the duel that morning...Forgetting was not an option.

"Bye Malfoy," Ron said croakily. "Try not to be such a git next year."

Malfoy smirked. "Yeah. Having you for a role model probably made me damn annoying."

Ron laughed then, turning and dragging his trunk behind him as he walked toward the barrier. Argent rode on his shoulder, claws sunk in deeply, as he didn't have a carrier for her. He was shaking his head and still laughing. Will wonders never cease? Harry thought. Malfoy insults him, and Ron laughs. No wonder he forgave me; if he could forgive Malfoy, he could overlook just about anything, Harry thought.

There were hardly any people left. Harry put his hand out to Malfoy, who took it with no hesitation. Harry remembered shaking hands with him before the Quidditch match. That seemed a hundred years ago. Throwing him for a loop by using Ginny as the Seeker, then defending him afterward...they didn't need to say a word. Malfoy nodded at him and Harry nodded back. If we spoke, we'd just insult each other, Harry thought. It's better this way.

Ginny and Hermione had exchanged a hug while they shook hands, and now each boy turned to the girl next to him. Harry swallowed and looked down into her face, brushed a curl away from

her brow. He could never have imagined this a year ago, all of the things that had happened between them. She slid her arms around his neck and he held her closely, hesitating for a moment, looking over her shoulder at the few remaining people on the platform before lowering his mouth to hers and kissing her. He drank her in, holding her tightly, trying to imprint her on his memory for two months...He couldn't believe they would be apart for so long! It had never mattered before, in other summers. Now owl post just wouldn't be enough...

He opened his eyes a crack while kissing her; over her shoulder he could see that Malfoy had also enfolded Ginny in his arms. She grasped his upper arms as he held her waist; he didn't have to bend over, as he did with Hermione. Then he realized that Ginny was looking at him too, over Malfoy's shoulder, and he closed his eyes abruptly, but he ended the kiss, planting additional kisses on her cheeks and forehead. She gazed hungrily at him, as though she would scandalize everyone left on the platform by ripping off all of his clothes and attacking him. He caught his breath; there, that was it. That was the look in her eyes that he would miss...

They heard Sandy hissing. Harry was startled. Could he have heard correctly? He looked at Ginny and Malfoy. He didn't know what to make of what she'd said. Then he looked back at Hermione.

"Well, Harry? I asked you what she said."

"Oh, she just said--that friends would say goodbye." She smiled and nodded, kissed him again on the lips, briefly, then turned with her trunk and Crookshanks' carrier and walked toward the barrier. Malfoy also took his trunk and headed toward the barrier; they reached it at the same time, and Harry could see Malfoy's lips moving, then Hermione's, her face contorted sarcastically. They were at it again, he thought, smiling and shaking his head. But Hermione could give as good as she got, he knew.

He looked around the platform. Everyone else had gone. He and Ginny were the only ones left. He looked at her, and she looked back, and he could see that she wasn't the same little girl who had peered through cracks in doorways at him when she was eleven. She was a beautiful young woman, a powerful witch, and a good friend. He still started to shake when he remembered finding her in the Potions Dungeon, Malfoy apparently attacking her; that it turned out to be fake was immaterial. It didn't change the way he felt, seeing that.

He stepped toward her and she nodded, with a small smile, she put her arms around his neck and he put his around her back. They held each other closely, more an affirmation that they were there for each other than a hug. His face was buried in her hair and his throat felt tight.

"Gin, I just wanted you to know how scared I was--when we found you in the Potions Dungeon..."

She separated from him, reddening. "I know that was stupid, Harry. We just--we had to think of something that would really set Ron off." She paused and looked up at him. "Or you."

Harry gazed back at her, unable to get the dream Ginny out of his mind, his hands on her silky skin...He swallowed and whispered, "I was just so glad you were all right."

She leaned forward, kissing him quickly and lightly on the lips. "Thank you, Harry," she said softly. Harry stared at her. Even though Sandy had said, "A ram will kiss a lion," he still felt like he might have misunderstood what she meant. It reminded him of something...*The lion will lie down with the lamb...and a little child shall lead them.* He thought that was it. A lamb was just a young ram. He had some vague memory of the fragment of scripture from Christmas or Easter when he was young. Going to St. Bede's for the funeral must have jogged his memory. He checked the rest of the platform; it was deserted. Everyone else had gone through the

barrier. He looked at her. She was turning to go through, back to the Muggle station. He watched her disappear; she didn't look back. He stood on the platform for what felt like a long time, gazing at the empty space where so many bodies had been jostling not too long ago. It was time; it was time to face his aunt and uncle. Time to get on with the business of living. He reached down for his trunk with his right hand, picked up Hedwig's cage with his left, and walked toward the barrier.

* * * * *

"Petunia!" Uncle Vernon's voice bellowed from their bathroom. "Where are the extra loo rolls?"

Harry smiled; some things never changed. Vernon Dursley had cut himself shaving again, and run out of toilet paper to put on the cuts. Although he knew his uncle probably wasn't comforted by having small nicks and cuts all over his face, Harry was. It was a constant. Harry had just finished showering and shaving himself, in the bath that opened off the hall, between his bedroom and the guest room. He'd picked up an electric razor at MacTavish's when they'd been shopping there; he knew that to stay within the law, he should use neither his wand nor his Animagus training to take care of shaving while he wasn't in school. He still wondered why his uncle didn't use an electric, but he also knew that no well-meaning suggestion from Harry would ever be taken in the spirit intended.

He rubbed his face as he returned to his room, towel wrapped around his waist. It wasn't as smooth as when he used magic, but he wasn't covered in cuts, either. After he dressed, he put Sandy around his arm and went downstairs, humming. He planned to call Dick after breakfast, ask for a job. It was nice to feel that he might be really useful, and make some money as well, doing something he enjoyed. He tried to think of what wizarding jobs might take place out-of-doors, for he'd decided that, when possible, he didn't want to work in cooped-up, enclosed spaces. Quidditch player was all that came to mind so far. Oh, well, he thought. There's time to consider all that.

He sat down at the table, in his usual spot. There were places laid for three of them; Dudley's side of the table was bare. It even looked as though they were avoiding putting the newspaper and toast rack and teapot there. No man's land.

Harry poured himself some orange juice from the pitcher on the table and reached for some toast and marmalade. He practically jumped out of his skin when his aunt spoke to him. She had her back to him, standing at the stove making his uncle's eggs.

"That Dick called," she said sharply. "Wants you to go to Seven Magnolia Crescent tomorrow morning at eight. Says he has a job for you. What good you'll be to him, I hardly know..." she added, putting a great deal of salt on Vernon's eggs. Well, he thought, that saved him from having to call Dick. Harry looked at her back. She was pretty damn constant too, he thought. He was glad she hadn't designated him a substitute for Dudley; he couldn't have taken it. The fussing would have been unbearable. He was used to this; this was far better.

"Do you want me to give the garden here a going-over today? Looks like there's a fair number of weeds. And that wild ivy's going to choke the climbing roses."

She made a noise like, "Hmmp!" Then she said, "If you like. If you haven't gotten so soft that a little *real* work will kill you..." Then she stopped and looked at Harry, horrified. Harry froze. He never thought about it much, but death really did crop up in everyday speech a great deal. He swallowed the bite of toast he'd been chewing, wondering what she was thinking. *Pity it wasn't you instead of my Dudley*, probably. It would be logical. It's what *I* would be thinking,

he realized. Who wouldn't?

He nodded. "I've already been running this morning. I'm all set to go. Is the potting shed unlocked?"

She pointed mutely to the key on a nail by the door, still looking appalled that she'd used the turn of phrase she had. He felt that he should probably say or do something compassionate, pat her hand, at least, but instead he rose and moved toward the door to the garden, unhooking the shed key, leaving her standing there, letting Vernon's eggs burn.

Suddenly, she came to life again as her Dudley-substitute entered the kitchen. She smiled and laughed, turning off the flame under the eggs. Then she took some sausages from a pan where they'd been staying warm. She arranged them on a plate, put the plate on the table and pulled out the chair slightly.

A small Yorkshire terrier leapt upon the chair where Dudley used to sit and brought his front paws up onto the table, starting to nudge the sausages with his nose. After a couple of tries, he finally succeeded in getting one in his mouth, and he chewed it contentedly. Aunt Petunia cooed to him and patted him on the head while he chewed.

"There's my little Dunkirk! My little Dunky-wunky! What a good boy..." Aunt Marge had brought the terrier over the day after the funeral. She had thought Petunia could use the companionship. His aunt had taken to the small off-white dog right away, and he to her. Aunt Marge wasn't so bad, Harry thought, when she wasn't insulting people's parents...

She returned to the stove, preparing to dish up the burnt eggs to her husband. Harry could hear him descending the stairs. He'd already become accustomed to his wife putting Dunkirk first; he didn't question it. Harry actually thought this bit of consideration was rather touching. He never really thought of his aunt and uncle showing affection for each other. (Although they must have, once, to have Dudley.) The dog's sausages had been carefully heated so as not to be too hot for him, nor too cold, but just right. Vernon, on the other hand, could eat burnt eggs.

Dunkirk barked when Vernon entered and sat down at the table, taking his place opposite him. The dog barked again. Vernon smiled feebly at Dunkirk, looking a little nervous. Harry tried not to laugh. Dunkirk did *not* recognize Vernon as his daddy, that much was clear.

Harry smiled at the cute little dog, then started to also pat him on the head, as his aunt had done. The dog turned his head and gave a growl low in his throat when he saw Harry's hand approaching. He pulled his hand back abruptly; he had thought the dog was just in a mood and hadn't gotten used to him when he'd tried that upon returning home, but now he was wondering whether he was possessed by the spirit of Dudley Dursley or something. Another possible constant, he thought. Or maybe--Sirius aside--I'm just more of a cat person. He watched the dog observing Vernon with what seemed to be suspicion. Clearly, Dunkirk was Aunt Petunia's puppy, and that was that. Harry opened the back door.

The garden was in half shade in the morning, until the sun passed over the house. In the shadow of the house it was cool and moist from the dew that still clung to the blades of grass and the leaves and flowers growing so profusely from the wet English spring Surrey had experienced. After getting a trowel and pail from the shed, he went to work first where it was warm and sunny, where the early morning dew had already evaporated. He knelt on the soft, springy grass, throwing uprooted weeds into the pail, the satisfaction of restoring order to the flower beds bringing him a sort of contented calm.

"Harry Potter," Sandy hissed at him suddenly.

He was momentarily startled. She'd been very quiet since he'd come back to Privet Drive from

the station. “Yes, Sandy?” he hissed back softly.

“Please put me on the ground.”

Harry did as she asked and went back to work. He watched her slither around the roots of one of the rose bushes, then move on to the ivy, quickly disappearing among the dark green glossy leaves that served as ground cover before they rose up to cling to the wall of the house. Harry had a sudden thought.

“Sandy?”

“Yes, Harry Potter?”

“Do you want your freedom?”

There was a pause. “I have not been free?”

Harry frowned. “That’s not quite what I meant...”

“Have you been keeping me prisoner?”

“Not exactly...”

“I was with you of my own volition, Harry Potter. But I think now...I think now I will live as I was meant to once more.”

Harry swallowed, watching the last place where he’d seen her. The leaves under which she’d disappeared still vibrated. Sandy gone. He’d just offered her the chance to leave, but he hadn’t thought she’d really consider it. He thought of all the times her predictions had changed his life; but it was possible that just being able to talk with her had been the most important thing to him. Perhaps he should have known that she wouldn’t want to stay with him forever.

“Of course, Sandy. I understand.”

“We each have a place where we are meant to be. This is mine.”

He nodded, although of course, she couldn’t see this. He wished he knew where *he* was meant to be. “I understand, Sandy,” he said again, his throat tight.

“I know you do, Harry,” she answered. He smiled through the beginnings of his tears. She had called him by just his first name. He would miss her a great deal.

“Will I see you here in the garden?”

“Possibly. And other gardens, perhaps. You will find other garden snakes, no doubt. I will tell of you to all of the snakes that I meet. When any one of them meets you, they will hear of the young wizard who is a Parselmouth, who can become a golden griffin, but who is not our enemy.”

He nodded again. “I hope I see you again soon.”

He waited for her response. And waited and waited.

“Sandy?” It sounded like English to him.

She was gone.

Harry tried not to cry, but it was difficult. He would encounter her again, he told himself. He would. He thought again about one of the last things she had said to him.

We each have a place where we are meant to be. This is mine.

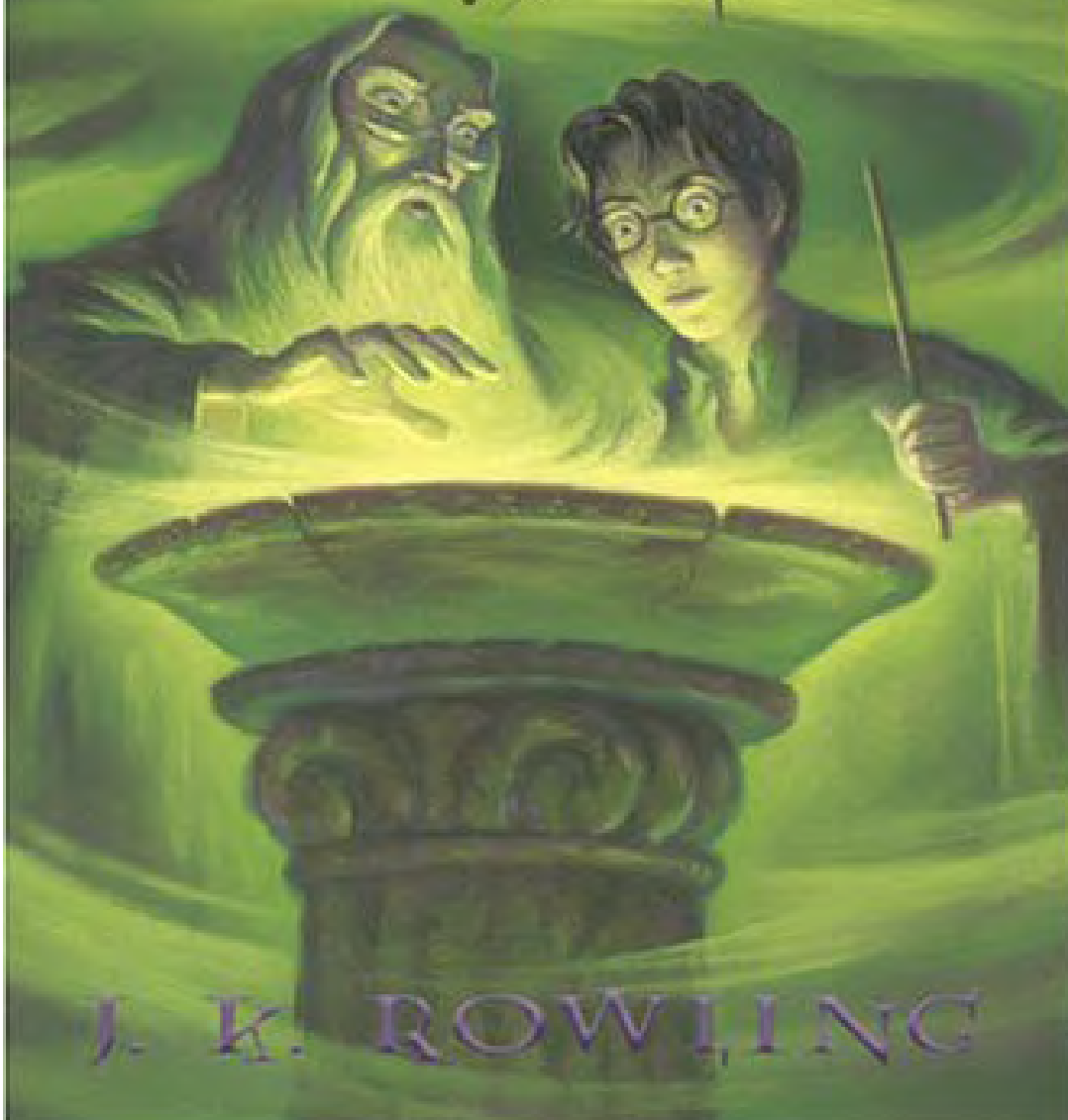
Perhaps someday, Harry thought, I’ll be able to say that as confidently as she did. But for now, he had the dark, moist soil under his fingers and the sun on his back and the smell of the garden in his nose...

That was enough.

~*~*~*~*~ END ~*~*~*~*~

Harry Potter

and the Half-Blood Prince



J. K. ROWLING

Table of Contents:

1. The Other Minister
2. Spinner's End
3. Will and Won't
4. Horace Slughorn
5. An Excess of Phlegm
6. Draco's Detour
7. The Slug Club
8. Snape Victorious
9. The Half-Blood Prince
10. The Hour of Gaunt
11. Hermione's Helping Hand
12. Silver & Opals
13. The Secret Riddle
14. Felix Felicis
15. The Unbreakable Vow
16. A Very Frosty Christmas
17. A Sluggish Memory
18. Birthday Surprises
19. Elf Trails
20. Lord Coldemort's Request
21. The Unknowable Room
22. After Burial
23. Horcruxes
24. Sectumsempra
25. The Seer Overheard
26. The Cave
27. The Lightning-Struck Towel
28. Flight of the Prince
29. The Phoenix Lament
30. The White Tomb

Chapter 1: The Other Minister

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping through his brain without leaving the slightest trace of meaning behind. He was waiting for a call from the President of a far distant country, and between wondering when the wretched man would telephone, and trying to suppress unpleasant memories of what had been a very long, tiring, and difficult week, there was not much space in his head for anything else. The more he attempted to focus on the print on the page before him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had appeared on the news that very day, not only to enumerate all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also to explain why each and every one of them was the government's fault.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. How on earth was his government supposed to have stopped that bridge collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge was fewer than ten years old, and the best experts were at a loss to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dare anyone suggest that it was lack of policemen that had resulted in those two very nasty and well-publicized murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property? And was it his fault that one of his Junior

Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to act so peculiarly that he was now going to be spending a lot more time with his family?

"A grim mood has gripped the country," the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin.

And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual. Even the weather was dismal; all this chilly mist in the middle of July... It wasn't right, it wasn't normal...

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching his arms above his head he looked around his office mournfully. It was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable chill. With a slight shiver, the Prime Minister got up and moved over to the window, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood with his back to the room, that he heard a soft cough behind him.

He froze, nose to nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it before. He turned very slowly to face the empty room.

"Hello?" he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded at once, a crisp, decisive voice that sounded as though it were reading a prepared statement. It was coming -- as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough -- from the froglike little man wearing a long silver wig who was depicted in a small, dirty oil painting in the far corner of the room.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge."

The man in the painting looked inquiringly at the Prime Minister.

"Er," said the Prime Minister, "listen... It's not a very good time for me... I'm waiting for a telephone call, you see... from the President of--"

"That can be rearranged," said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister's heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

"But I really was rather hoping to speak--"

"We shall arrange for the President to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead," said the little man. "Kindly respond immediately to Mr. Fudge."

"I... oh... very well," said the Prime Minister weakly. "Yes, I'll see Fudge."

He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face into what he hoped was a relaxed and unfazed expression, when bright green flames burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray a flicker of surprise or alarm, as a portly man appeared within the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out onto a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from the sleeves of his long pin-striped cloak, a lime-green bowler hat in his hand.

"Ah... Prime Minister," said Cornelius Fudge, striding forward with his hand outstretched. "Good to see you again."

The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, whose occasional appearances, apart from being downright alarming in themselves, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was looking distinctly careworn. He was thinner, balder, and grayer, and his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

"How can I help you?" he said, shaking Fudge's hand very briefly and gesturing toward the hardest of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Difficult to know where to begin," muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down, and placing his green bowler upon his knees. "What a week, what a week..."

"Had a bad one too, have you?" asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough on his plate already without any extra helpings from Fudge.

"Yes, of course," said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. "I've been having the same week you have, Prime Minister. The Brockdale Bridge... the Bones and Vance murders... not to mention the ruckus in the West Country..."

"You--er--your--I mean to say, some of your people were--were involved in those--those things, were they?"

Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look. "Of course they were," he said, "Surely you've realized what's going on?"

"I..." hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behavior that made him dislike Fudge's visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister and did not appreciate being made to feel like an ignorant schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He remembered it as though it were yesterday and knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savoring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and scheming, when he had heard a cough behind him, just like tonight, and turned to find that ugly little portrait

talking to him, announcing that the Minister of Magic was about to arrive and introduce himself

Naturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been utterly terrified to find a portrait talking to him, though this had been nothing to how he felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his hand. He had remained speechless throughout Fudge's kindly explanation that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world and his reassurances that he was not to bother his head about them as the Ministry of Magic took responsibility for the whole Wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them. It was, said Fudge, a difficult job that encompassed everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister remembered clutching the desk for support at this point). Fudge had then patted the shoulder of the still-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

"Not to worry," he had said, "it's odds-on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious going on our end, something that's likely to affect the Muggles--the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise, it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it a lot better than your predecessor. He tried to throw me out the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition."

At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last. "You're--you're not a hoax, then?"

It had been his last, desperate hope.

"No," said Fudge gently. "No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look."

And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

"But," said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, "but why--why has nobody told me--?"

"The Minister of Magic only reveals him--or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day," said Fudge, poking his wand back inside his jacket. "We find it the best way to maintain secrecy."

"But then," bleated the Prime Minister, "why hasn't a former Prime Minister warned me--?"

At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

"My dear Prime Minister, are you ever going to tell anybody?"

Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames, and vanished with a whooshing sound. The Prime Minister had stood there, quite motionless, and realized that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in the wide world would believe him?

The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time, he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep during his grueling election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the gerbil to his delighted niece and instructed his private secretary to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge's arrival. To the Prime Minister's dismay, however, the portrait had proved impossible to remove. When several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to pry it from the wall, the Prime Minister had abandoned the attempt and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. Occasionally he could have sworn he saw out of the corner of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of his frame and leaving nothing but a stretch of muddy-brown canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that his eyes were playing tricks on him when anything like this happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait had once again announced the imminent arrival of Fudge, who had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask why he was dripping all over the Axminster, Fudge had started ranting about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named "Serious" Black, something that sounded like "Hogwarts," and a boy called Harry Potter, none of which made the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

"...I've just come from Azkaban," Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat into his pocket. "Middle of the North Sea, you know, nasty flight... the dementors are in uproar"--he shuddered--"they've never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come to you, Prime Minister. Black's a known Muggle killer and may be planning to rejoin You-Know-Who... But of course, you don't even know who You-Know-Who is!" He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister for a moment, then said, "Well, sit down, sit down, I'd better fill you in... Have a whiskey..."

The Prime Minister rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whiskey, but he sat nevertheless. Fudge pulled out his wand, conjured two large glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister's hand, and drew up a chair.

Fudge had talked for more than an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud and wrote it instead on a piece of parchment, which he had thrust into the Prime Minister's whiskey-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

"So you think that..." He had squinted down at the name in his left hand. "Lord Vol--"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" snarled Fudge.

"I'm sorry... You think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still alive, then?"

"Well, Dumbledore says he is," said Fudge, as he had fastened his pin-striped cloak under his chin, "but we've never found him. If you ask me, he's not dangerous unless he's got support, so it's Black we ought to be worrying about. You'll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don't see each other again, Prime Minister! Good night."

But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the cabinet room to inform the Prime Minister that there had been a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been "involved," but that the Prime Minister was not to worry, the fact that You-Know-Who's Mark had been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident, and the Muggle Liaison Office was dealing with all memory modifications as they spoke.

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Fudge had added. "We're importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament, quite routine, but the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures tells me that it's down in the rule book that we have to notify you if we're bringing highly dangerous creatures into the country."

"I--what--dragons?" spluttered the Prime Minister.

"Yes, three," said Fudge. "And a sphinx. Well, good day to you."

The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two years later, Fudge had erupted out of the fire yet again, this time with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

"A mass breakout?" repeated the Prime Minister hoarsely.

"No need to worry, no need to worry!" shouted Fudge, already with one foot in the flames. "We'll have them rounded up in no time--just thought you ought to know!"

And before the Prime Minister could shout, "Now, wait just one moment!" Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks.

Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that, despite Fudge's assurances at their first meeting, they were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he liked to think about the Minister of Magic (or, as he always called Fudge in his head, the Other Minister), the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared it would be with graver news still. The site, therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.

"How should I know what's going on in the--er--Wizarding community?" snapped the Prime Minister now. "I have a country to run and quite enough concerns at the moment without--"

"We have the same concerns," Fudge interrupted. "The Brock-dale Bridge didn't wear out. That wasn't really a hurricane. Those murders were not the work of Muggles. And Herbert Chorley's family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The move should be affected tonight."

"What do you... I'm afraid I... What?" blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, "Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he's back. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back."

"Back? When you say 'back'... he's alive? I mean--"

The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when Fudge had told him about the wizard who was feared above all others, the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier.

"Yes, alive," said Fudge. "That is--I don't know--is a man alive if he can't be killed? I don't really understand it, and Dumbledore won't explain

properly--but anyway, he's certainly got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he's alive."

The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject that came up made him cast around for any details he could remember of their previous conversations.

"Is Serious Black with--er--He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Black? Black?" said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. "Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin's beard, no. Black's dead. Turns out we were--er--mistaken about Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn't in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named either. I mean," he added defensively, spinning the bowler hat still faster, "all the evidence pointed--we had more than fifty eyewitnesses--but anyway, as I say, he's dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. On Ministry of Magic premises. There's going to be an inquiry, actually..."

To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a glow of smugness at the thought that, deficient though he himself might be in the area of materializing out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in any of the government departments under his charge... Not yet, anyway...

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, "But Blacks by-the-by now. The point is, we're at war, Prime Minister, and steps must be taken."

"At war?" repeated the Prime Minister nervously. "Surely that's a little bit of an overstatement?"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January," said Fudge, speaking more and more rapidly and twirling his bowler so fast that it was a lime-green blur. "Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brockdale Bridge--he did it, Prime Minister, he threatened a mass Muggle killing unless I stood aside for him and--"

"Good grief, so it's your fault those people were killed and I'm having to answer questions about rusted rigging and corroded expansion joints and I don't know what else!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"My fault!" said Fudge, coloring up. "Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?"

"Maybe not," said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, "but I would have put all my efforts into catching the blackmailer before he committed any such atrocity!"

"Do you really think I wasn't already making every effort?" demanded Fudge heatedly. "Every Auror in the Ministry was--and is--trying to find him

and round up his followers, but we happen to be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost three decades!"

"So I suppose you're going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country too?" said the Prime Minister, his temper rising with every pace he took. It was infuriating to discover the reason for all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public, almost worse than it being the government's fault after all.

"That was no hurricane," said Fudge miserably.

"Excuse me!" barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. "Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, lampposts bent, horrible injuries--"

"It was the Death Eaters," said Fudge. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. And... and we suspect giant involvement."

The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall. "What involvement?"

Fudge grimaced. "He used giants last time, when he wanted to go for the grand effect," he said. "The Office of Misinformation has been working around the clock, we've had teams of Obliviators out trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we've got most of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures running around Somerset, but we can't find the giant--it's been a disaster."

"You don't say!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"I won't deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry," said Fudge. "What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones."

"Losing who?"

"Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have murdered her in person, because she was a very gifted witch and--and all the evidence was that she put up a real fight."

Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

"But that murder was in the newspapers," said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. "Our newspapers. Amelia Bones... it just said she was a middle-aged woman who lived alone. It was a--a nasty killing, wasn't it? It's had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see."

Fudge sighed. "Well, of course they are," he said. "Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn't she? We, on the other hand, know exactly who did it, not that that gets us any further toward catching him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn't hear about that one--"

"Oh yes I did!" said the Prime Minister. "It happened just around the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The papers had a field day with it, 'breakdown of law and order in the Prime Minister's backyard--'"

"And as if all that wasn't enough," said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, "we've got dementors swarming all over the place, attacking people left, right, and center..."

Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

"I thought dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban," he said cautiously.

"They did," said Fudge wearily. "But not anymore. They've deserted the prison and joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I won't pretend that wasn't a blow."

"But," said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, "didn't you tell me they're the creatures that drain hope and happiness out of people?"

"That's right. And they're breeding. That's what's causing all this mist."

The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the towns and countryside, spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters, made him feel quite faint.

"Now see here, Fudge--you've got to do something! It's your responsibility as Minister of Magic!"

"My dear Prime Minister, you can't honestly think I'm still Minister of Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago! The whole Wizarding community has been screaming for my resignation for a fortnight. I've never known them so united in my whole term of office!" said Fudge, with a brave attempt at a smile.

The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been placed, he still rather felt for the shrunken-looking man sitting opposite him.

"I'm very sorry," he said finally. "If there's anything I can do?"

"It's very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up to date on recent events and to introduce you to my successor. I rather thought he'd be here by now, but of course, he's very busy at the moment, with so much going on."

Fudge looked around at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ear with the point of a quill. Catching Fudge's eye, the portrait said, "He'll be here in a moment, he's just finishing a letter to Dumbledore."

"I wish him luck," said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. "I've been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past fortnight, but he won't budge."

If he'd just been prepared to persuade the boy, I might still be... Well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success."

Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which suddenly spoke in its crisp, official voice.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic."

"Yes, yes, fine," said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald green again, rose up, and revealed a second spinning wizard in their heart, disgorging him moments later onto the antique rug.

Fudge got to his feet and, after a moment's hesitation, the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival straighten up, dust down his long black robes, and look around.

The Prime Minister's first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of gray in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. There was an immediate impression of shrewdness and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the Wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge as a leader in these dangerous times.

"How do you do?" said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

"Fudge told you everything?" he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister heard the lock click.

"Er--yes," said the Prime Minister. "And if you don't mind, I'd rather that door remained unlocked."

"I'd rather not be interrupted," said Scrimgeour shortly, "or watched," he added, pointing his wand at the windows, so that the curtains swept across them. "Right, well, I'm a busy man, so let's get down to business. First of all, we need to discuss your security."

The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, "I am perfectly happy with the security I've already got, thank you very--"

"Well, we're not," Scrimgeour cut in. "It'll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the Imperius Curse. The new secretary in your outer office--"

"I'm not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that's what you're suggesting!" said the Prime Minister hotly. "He's highly efficient, gets through twice the work the rest of them--"

"That's because he's a wizard," said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. "A highly trained Auror, who has been assigned to you for your protection."

"Now, wait a moment!" declared the Prime Minister. "You can't just put your people into my office, I decide who works for me--"

"I thought you were happy with Shackbolt?" said Scrimgeour coldly.

"I am--that's to say, I was--"

"Then there's no problem, is there?" said Scrimgeour.

"I... well, as long as Shackbolt's work continues to be... er... excellent," said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour barely seemed to hear him.

"Now, about Herbert Chorley, your Junior Minister," he continued. "The one who has been entertaining the public by impersonating a duck."

"What about him?" asked the Prime Minister.

"He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse," said Scrimgeour. "It's addled his brains, but he could still be dangerous."

"He's only quacking!" said the Prime Minister weakly. "Surely a bit of a rest... Maybe go easy on the drink..."

"A team of Healers from St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries are examining him as we speak. So far he has attempted to strangle three of them," said Scrimgeour. "I think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while."

"I... well... He'll be all right, won't he?" said the Prime Minister anxiously.

Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back toward the fireplace.

"Well, that's really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister--or, at least, I shall probably be too busy to come personally, in which case I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity."

Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had a toothache. Scrimgeour was already rummaging in his pocket for the mysterious powder that turned the fire green. The Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to suppress all evening burst from him at last.

"But for heaven's sake--you're wizards! You can do magic! Surely you can sort out--well--anything!"

Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile this time as he said kindly, "The trouble is, the other side can do magic too, Prime Minister."

And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

Chapter 2: Spinner's End

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint pop, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, wary eyes fixed upon this strange new phenomenon. The figure seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass.

With a second and louder pop, another hooded figure materialized.

"Wait!"

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank. There was a flash of green light, a yelp, and the fox fell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

"Just a fox," said a woman's voice dismissively from under the hood. "I thought perhaps an Auror--Cissy, wait!"

But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just fallen down.

"Cissy--Narcissa--listen to me--"

The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

"Go back, Bella!"

"You must listen to me!"

"I've listened already. I've made my decision. Leave me alone!"

The woman named Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow, cobbled street. The other woman, Bella, followed at once. Side by side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness.

"He lives here?" asked Bella in a voice of contempt. "Here? In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to set foot--"

But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

"Cissy, wait!"

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the streetlamps were broken; the two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she turned another corner, this time succeeding in catching hold of her arm and swinging her around so that they faced each other.

"Cissy, you must not do this, you can't trust him--"

"The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?"

"The Dark Lord is... I believe... mistaken," Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked around to check that they were indeed alone. "In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord's--"

"Let go, Bella!" snarled Narcissa, and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other's face. Bella merely laughed.

"Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn't--"

"There is nothing I wouldn't do anymore!" Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand like a knife, there was another flash of light. Bella let go of her sister's arm as though burned.

"Narcissa!"

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved deeper into the deserted labyrinth of brick houses. At last, Narcissa hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Her footsteps echoed on the cobbles as she passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, panting slightly, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streaming down her back gave her the look of a drowned person.

"Narcissa!" said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Severus," she said in a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

"But of course."

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

"Snape," she said curtly as she passed him.

"Bellatrix," he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside, and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands clasped in her lap. Bellatrix lowered her hood more slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape as she moved to stand behind Narcissa.

"So, what can I do for you?" Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

"We... we are alone, aren't we?" Narcissa asked quietly.

'Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?'

He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase upon which a small man stood frozen.

"As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests," said Snape lazily.

The man crept, hunchbacked, down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose, and wore an unpleasant simper. His left hand was caressing his right, which looked as though it was encased in a bright silver glove.

"Narcissa!" he said, in a squeaky voice. "And Bellatrix! How charming--"

"Wormtail will get us drinks, if you'd like them," said Snape. "And then he will return to his bedroom."

Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

"I am not your servant!" he squeaked, avoiding Snape's eye.

"Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me."

"To assist, yes--but not to make you drinks and--and clean your house!"

"I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments," said Snape silkily. "This can be easily arranged: I shall speak to the Dark Lord--"

"I can speak to him myself if I want to!"

"Of course you can," said Snape, sneering. "But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do."

Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second hidden door. They heard banging and a clinking of glasses. Within seconds he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried from their presence, slamming the book-covered door behind him.

Snape poured out three glasses of bloodred wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks, whilst Bellatrix said nothing, but continued to glower at Snape. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

"The Dark Lord," he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses. As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, "Severus, I'm sorry to come here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me--"

Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang and a squeal, followed by the sound of Wormtail scurrying back up the stairs.

"My apologies," said Snape. "He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don't know what he means by it... You were saying, Narcissa?"

She took a great, shuddering breath and started again.

"Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but--"

"Then you ought to hold your tongue!" snarled Bellatrix. "Particularly in present company!"

"Present company'?" repeated Snape sardonically. "And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?"

"That I don't trust you, Snape, as you very well know!"

Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down upon the table and sat back

again, his hands upon the arms of his chair, smiling into Bellatrix's glowering face.

"Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix," said Snape. "Why is it that you do not trust me?"

"A hundred reasons!" she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. "Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you've lived in Dumbledore's pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Sorcerer's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"

She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the color high in her cheeks. Behind her, Narcissa sat motionless, her face still hidden in her hands.

Snape smiled.

"Before I answer you — oh yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind my back, and carry false tales of my treachery to the Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not

asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?"

She hesitated.

"I know he believes you, but..."

"You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?"

Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his drink again, sipped it, and continued, "You ask where I was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

"You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius" — he inclined his head slightly to Narcissa — "and many others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but

there it is... If he had not forgiven we who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left."

"He'd have me!" said Bellatrix passionately. "I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!"

"Yes, indeed, most admirable," said Snape in a bored voice. "Of course, you weren't a lot of use to him in prison, but the gesture was undoubtedly fine —"

"Gesture!" she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. "While I endured the dementors, you remained at Hogwarts, comfortably playing Dumbledore's pet!"

"Not quite," said Snape calmly. "He wouldn't give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think it might, ah, bring about a relapse, .. tempt me into my old ways."

"This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?" she jeered. "Why did you stay there all that time, Snape? Still spying on Dumbledore for a master you believed dead?"

"Hardly," said Snape, "although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information on Dumbledore to give him when he returned, a rather more useful welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is..."

"But you stayed —"

"Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed," said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. "I had a comfortable job that I preferred to a stint in Azkaban. They were rounding up the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore's protection kept me out of jail; it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: The Dark Lord does not complain that I stayed, so I do not see why you do.

"I think you next wanted to know," he pressed on, a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting, "why I stood between the Dark Lord and the Sorcerer's Stone. That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faithful Death Eater to Dumbledore's stooge. He was in a pitiable condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally might turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. I deeply regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and unworthy Quirrell attempting to steal the stone and, I admit, I did all I could to thwart him."

Bellatrix's mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

"But you didn't return when he came back, you didn't fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —"

"Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore's orders."

"On Dumbledore's — ?" she began, in tones of outrage.

"Think!" said Snape, impatient again. "Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts as a spy! By allowing Dumbledore to think that I was only returning to the Dark Lord's side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix ever since! Consider, Bellatrix: The Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months. I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do, to plan my next move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn't I?"

"The Dark Lord's initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, I assure you, when I explained that I remained faithful, although Dumbledore thought I was his man. Yes, the Dark Lord thought that I had left him forever, but he was wrong."

"But what use have you been?" sneered Bellatrix. "What useful information have we had from you?"

"My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord," said Snape. "If he chooses not to share it with you —"

"He shares everything with me!" said Bellatrix, firing up at once. "He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —"

"Does he?" said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. "Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?"

"That was not my fault!" said Bellatrix, flushing. "The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious — if Lucius hadn't —"

"Don't you dare — don't you dare blame my husband!" said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

"There is no point apportioning blame," said Snape smoothly. "What is done, is done."

"But not by you!" said Bellatrix furiously. "No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you not, Snape?"

"My orders were to remain behind," said Snape. "Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Dumbledore would not have noticed if I had joined forces with the Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And — forgive me — you speak of dangers... you were facing six teenagers, were you not?"

"They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!" snarled Bellatrix. "And, while we are on the subject of the Order, you still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their headquarters, don't you?"

"I am not the Secret-Keeper; I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I think? The Dark Lord is satisfied with the information I have passed him on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it certainly helped dispose of Sirius Black, though I give you full credit for finishing him off."

He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did not soften.

"You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?"

"Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?" asked Snape.

"He... lately, we... I am asking you, Snape!"

"If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —"

"You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!" she jeered.

"I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely trying to explain why the Dark Lord is not sorry that Potter survived, at least until a year ago..."

"But why did you keep him alive?"

"Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore's protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree that murdering his favorite student might have turned him against me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were still many stories circulating about him, rumors that he himself was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord's attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lord's old followers thought Potter might be a standard around which we could all rally once more. I was curious, I admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set foot in the castle.

"Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father before him. I have done my utmost to have him thrown out of Hogwarts, where I believe he scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been a fool to risk it with Dumbledore close at hand."

"And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has never suspected you?" asked Bellatrix. "He has no idea of your true allegiance, he trusts you implicitly still?"

"I have played my part well," said Snape. "And you overlook Dumbledore's greatest weakness: He has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death

Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms — though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard — oh yes, he has," (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), "the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord."

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

"Now... you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?"

Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

"Yes, Severus. I — I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and..."

She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

"The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it," Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. "He wishes none to know of the plan. It is... very secret. But —"

"If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak," said Snape at once. "The Dark Lord's word is law."

Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had entered the house.

"There!" she said triumphantly to her sister. "Even Snape says so: You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!"

But Snape had gotten to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street, then closed them again with a jerk. He turned around to face Narcissa, frowning.

"It so happens that I know of the plan," he said in a low voice. "I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord."

"I thought you must know about it!" said Narcissa, breathing more freely. "He trusts you so, Severus..."

"You know about the plan?" said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. "You know?"

"Certainly," said Snape. "But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all."

"Severus," she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. "My son... my only son..."

"Draco should be proud," said Bellatrix indifferently. "The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this for Draco: He isn't shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —"

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.

"That's because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is vengeance for Lucius's mistake, I know it!"

Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend not to hear her.

"That's why he's chosen Draco, isn't it?" she persisted. "To punish Lucius?"

"If Draco succeeds," said Snape, still looking away from her, "he will be honored above all others."

"But he won't succeed!" sobbed Narcissa. "How can he, when the Dark Lord himself—?"

Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

"I only meant... that nobody has yet succeeded... Severus... please... You are, you have always been, Draco's favorite teacher... You are Lucius's old friend... I beg you... You are the Dark Lord's favorite, his most trusted advisor... Will you speak to him, persuade him — ?"

"The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it," said Snape flatly. "I cannot pretend that the Dark Lord is not angry with Lucius. Lucius was supposed to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the bargain. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed."

"Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!" choked Narcissa. "He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to be killed trying!"

When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling onto his chest, she gasped, "You could do it. You could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would succeed, of course you would, and he would reward you beyond all of us —"

Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tearstained face, he said slowly, "He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first. You

see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy."

"In other words, it doesn't matter to him if Draco is killed!"

"The Dark Lord is very angry," repeated Snape quietly. "He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily."

She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

"My only son... my only son..."

"You should be proud!" said Bellatrix ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!"

Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, lifted her up, and steered her back onto the sofa. He then poured her more wine and forced the glass into her hand.

"Narcissa, that's enough. Drink this. Listen to me."

She quieted a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky sip.

"It might be possible... for me to help Draco."

She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

"Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try."

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape's feet, seized his hand in both of hers, and pressed her lips to it.

"If you are there to protect him... Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape's expression was blank, unreadable. Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

"Aren't you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he'll try, I'm sure... The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action... oh, on the Dark Lord's orders, of course!"

Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa's tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

"Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow," he said quietly.
"Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonded."

Bellatrix's mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix's astonished gaze, they grasped right hands.

"You will need your wand, Bellatrix," said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

"And you will need to move a little closer," he said.

She stepped forward so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?"

"I will," said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

"I will," said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

"And, should it prove necessary... if it seems Draco will fail..." whispered Narcissa (Snape's hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), "will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

There was a moment's silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

"I will," said Snape.

Bellatrix's astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third unique flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with the others, and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a fiery snake.

Chapter 3: Will And Won't

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four hours, staring out at the darkening street, and had finally fallen asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold win-dowpane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open. The misty fug his breath had left on the window sparkled in the orange glare of the streetlamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all color, so that he looked ghostly beneath his shock of untidy black hair.

The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores, and sweet wrappers littered the floor, a number of spellbooks lay higgledy-piggledy among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The headline of one blared:

HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything" said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going so far as to call Potter "the Chosen One," believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although {ctd. page2, column 5)

A second newspaper lay beside die first. This one bore die headline:

SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair and a rather ravaged face. The picture was moving — the man was waving at the ceiling.

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister of

Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeours representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to (ctd. page 3, column 2)

To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title ministry guarantees students' sapety was visible.

Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this autumn.

"For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans," said the Minister, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of countercurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School.

Most seem reassured by the new Minister's tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs. Augusta Longbottom, "My grandson, Neville — a good friend of

Harry Potter's, incidentally, who fought the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —

But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy owl. Her amber eyes surveyed the room imperiously, her head swiveling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too deeply asleep to hear her.

A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open; it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but for a residue of old underwear, sweets, empty ink bottles, and broken quills that

coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

----ISSUED ON BEHALF OF----

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK
FORCES

The Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.

2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.

3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and, in the case of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparition.

4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).

5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).

6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror office immediately.

7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, but he did not wake up. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, was a

piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry had read this letter so often since its arrival three days ago that although it had been delivered in a tightly furled scroll, it now lay quite flat.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven p.m. to escort you to the Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.

Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,

I am yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock that evening, when he had first taken up his position beside his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep rereading Dumbledore's words; Harry had sent back his "yes" with the delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: Either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not.

But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after a mere fortnight of their company. He could not shrug off the feeling that something was going to go

wrong — his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore could be prevented from collecting him; the letter might turn out not to be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being let down and having to unpack again. The only gesture he had made to the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve and, at that precise moment, the street-lamp outside the window went out.

Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness were an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the glass, he pressed his nose against the window instead and squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock, knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything and everything within reach from the floor and throwing it into the trunk. Then as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks, and a packet of clasps across the room, the doorbell rang. Downstairs in the living room his Uncle Vernon shouted, "Who the blazes is calling at this lime of night?"

Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys that Dumbledore might be coming. Feeling both panicky mid close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep

voice say, "Good evening. You must be Mr. Dursley. I daresay Harry has told you I would be coming for him?"

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to remain out of arm's reach of his uncle whenever possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles were perched on his crooked nose, and he was wearing a long black traveling cloak and a pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose mustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore's, though black, and who was wearing a puce dress-ing gown, was staring at the visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

"Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did not warn you that I was coming," said Dumbledore pleasantly. "However, let us assume that you have invited me warmly into your house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times."

He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door behind him.

"It is a long time since my last visit," said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. "I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing."

Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon — the vein pulsing in his uncles temple was

reaching danger point — but something about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of his appearance, but it might, too, have been that even Uncle Vernon could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

"Ah, good evening Harry," said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. "Excellent, excellent."

These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at Harry and say "excellent" was a man with whom he could never see eye to eye.

"I don't mean to be rude —" he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

"--yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often," Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. "Best to say nothing at all, my dear man. Ah, and this must be Petunia."

The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry's aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightdress, clearly halfway through her usual pre-bedtime wipe-down of all the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsey face registered nothing but shock.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed to effect an introduction. "We have corresponded, of course." Harry thought this an odd way of reminding Aunt Petunia that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. "And this must be your son, Dudley?"

Dudley had that moment peered round the living room door, his large, blond head rising out of the striped collar of his pajamas looked oddly disembodied, his mouth gaping in astonishment and I can. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to say anything, but as the •ilcncc stretched on he smiled.

"Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?"

Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. I hurry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped the last few stairs and followed Dumbledore, who had settled himself in the armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked quite extraordinarily out of place.

"Aren't — aren't we leaving, sir?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first," said Dumbledore. "And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle's hospitality only a little longer."

"You will, will you?"

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder, and Dudley skulking behind them both.

"Yes," said Dumbledore simply, "I shall."

He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forward and knocked the knees out from under all three of the Dursleys so that they collapsed upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

"We may as well be comfortable," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shriveled; it looked as though his flesh had been burned away. || | • <'•|

"Sir — what happened to your — ?"

"Later, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please sit down."

Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

"I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment," Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, "but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness."

A third twitch of the wand, and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a generous measure of honey-colored liquid into each of the glasses, which then floated to each person in the room.

"Madam Rosmertas finest oak-matured mead," said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his own and sipped. He had never tasted anything like it before, but enjoyed it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at one another, tried to ignore their glasses completely, a difficult feat, as they were nudging them gently on the sides of their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, turning toward him, "a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By us, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius's will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned."

Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernons head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except, "Oh. Right."

"This is, in the main, fairly straightforward," Dumbledore went on. "You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account at Gringotts, and you inherit all of Sirius's personal possessions. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —"

"His godfather's dead?" said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. 1
Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The glass of mead was
now knocking quite insistently on the side of Vernons head; he attempted to
beat it away. "He's dead? His godfather?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in
the Dursleys. "Our problem," he continued to Harry, as if there had been no
interruption, "is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"He's been left a house?" said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes
narrowing, but nobody answered him.

"You can keep using it as headquarters," said Harry. "I don't care. You
can have it, I don't really want it." Harry never wanted to set foot in number
twelve, Grimmauld Place again if he could help it. He thought he would be
haunted forever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms
alone, imprisoned within the place he had wanted so desperately to leave.

"That is generous," said Dumbledore. "We have, however, vacated the
building temporarily."

"Why?"

"Well," said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who
was now being rapped smartly over the head by the persistent glass of mead,
"Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct
line, to the next male with the name of 'Black.' Sirius was the very last of the

line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."

A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius's mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed into Harry's mind. "I bet there has," he said.

"Quite," said Dumbledore. "And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius's living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Without realizing what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius's killer, inherit his house?

"No," he said.

"Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn't get it either," said Dumbledore calmly. "The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position,"

"But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?"

"Fortunately," said Dumbledore, "there is a simple test."

He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted, "Will you get these ruddy things off us?"

Harry looked around; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced up and down on their skulls, their contents flying everywhere.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. All three glasses vanished. "But it would have been better manners to drink it, you know."

It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into the cushions with Aunt Petunia and Dudley and said nothing, keeping his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

"You see," Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, "if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —"

He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears, and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the Dursleys' shag carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek; nothing this filthy had entered her house in living memory. Dudley drew his large, bare, pink feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up his pajama trousers, and Uncle Vernon bellowed, "What the hell is that?"

"Kreacher," finished Dumbledore.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his long, gnarled feet and pulling his ears. "Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't, won't —"

"As you can see, Harry," said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher's continued croaks of "won't, won't, won't," "Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership."

"I don't care," said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. "I don't want him."

"Won't, won't, won't, won't —"

"You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past year?"

"Won't, won't, won't, won't —"

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

"Give him an order," said Dumbledore. "If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress."

"Won't, won't, won't, WON'T!"

Kreacher's voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, "Kreacher, shut up!"

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

"Well, that simplifies matters," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "It means that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher."

"Do I — do I have to keep him with me?" Harry asked, aghast, as Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

"Not if you don't want to," said Dumbledore. "If I might make ii suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him."

"Yeah," said Harry in relief, "yeah, I'll do that. Er — Kreacher — I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there with the other house-elves."

Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of deepest loathing and, with another loud crack, vanished.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "There is also the matter of the hip-pogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —"

"No," said Harry at once, "he can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that."

"Hagrid will be delighted," said Dumbledore, smiling. "He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak's safety, to rechristen him 'Witherwings' for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Harry, is your trunk packed?"

Erm...

"Doubtful that I would turn up?" Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

"I'll just go and — er — finish off," said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers.

It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from under the bed, screwed the top back on his jar of color-change ink, and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and holding Hedwig's cage in the other, he made his way back downstairs,

He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the living room.

Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than cold custard, and Harry did not dare look at the Dursleys as he said, "Professor — I'm ready now."

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Just one last thing, then." And he turned to speak to the Dursleys once more.

"As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a years time —"

"No," said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore's arrival.

"I'm sorry?" said Dumbledore politely.

"No, he doesn't. He's a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn't turn eighteen until the year after next."

"Ah," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "but in the Wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen."

Uncle Vernoi muttered, "Preposterous," but Dumbledore ignored him,

"Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort was returned to this country. The Wizarding community is currently in a state of open warfare. Harry, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about his parents' murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him ;is though he were your own."

Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a kind of chill emanating from him and noticed that the Dursleys drew very slightly closer together.

"You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you."

Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dudley squeezed between them.

"Us — mistreat Dudders? What d'you — ?" began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his ringer for silence, a silence which fell as though he had struck Uncle Vernon dumb.

"The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house 'home.' However miserable he has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Harry turns seventeen; in other words, at the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time."

None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had ever been mistreated.

Uncle Vernon looked as though he had something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

"Well, Harry... time for us to be off," said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. "Until we meet again," he said to the Dursleys, who looked as though that moment could wait forever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

"Bye," said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry's trunk, upon which Hedwig's cage was perched.

"We do not want to be encumbered by these just now," he said, pulling out his wand again. "I shall send them to the Burrow to await us there. However, I would like you to bring your Invisibility Cloak... just in case."

Harry extracted his cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had stuffed it into an inside pocket of his jacket, Dumbledore waved his wand and the trunk, cage, and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again, and the front door opened onto cool, misty darkness.

"And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure."

Chapter 4: Horace Slughorn

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would indeed come to fetch him, Harry felt distinctly awkward as they set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with the headmaster outside of Hogwarts before; there was usually a desk between them. The memory of their last face-to-face encounter kept intruding too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shouted a lot on that occasion, not to mention done his best to smash several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

"Keep your wand at the ready, Harry," he said brightly.

"But I thought I'm not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?"

"If there is an attack," said Dumbledore, "I give you permission to use any counterjinx or curse that might occur to you. However, I do not think you need worry about being attacked tonight."

"Why not, sir?"

"You are with me," said Dumbledore simply. "This will do, Harry."

He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

"You have not, of course, passed your Apparition Test," he said.

"No," said Harry. "I thought you had to be seventeen?"

"You do," said Dumbledore. "So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don't mind — as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment."

Harry gripped Dumbledore's proffered forearm.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Well, here we go."

Harry felt Dumbledore's arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip; the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull and then —

He gulped great lungfulls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realized that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village square, in the center of which stood an old war memorial and a few benches. His comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life.

"Are you all right?" asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. "The sensation does take some getting used to."

"I'm fine," said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. "But I think I might prefer brooms..."

Dumbledore smiled, drew his traveling cloak a little more lightly around his neck, and said, "This way."

He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

"So tell me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Your scar... has it been hurting at all?"

Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed the lightning-shaped mark.

"No," he said, "and I've been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort's getting so powerful again."

He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

"I, on the other hand, thought otherwise," said Dumbledore. "Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous access to his thoughts and

feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you."

"Well, I'm not complaining," said Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight into Voldemort's mind.

They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again. "Professor?"

"Harry?"

"Er — where exactly are we?"

"This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton."

"And what are we doing here?"

"Ah yes, of course, I haven't told you," said Dumbledore. "Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this in recent years, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts."

"How can I help with that, sir?"

"Oh, I think we'll find a use for you," said Dumbledore vaguely. "Left here, Harry."

They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain over Privet Drive for two weeks persisted here too. Thinking of dementors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

"Professor, why couldn't we just Apparate directly into your old colleague's house?"

"Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door," said Dumbledore. "Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity of denying us entry. In any case, most Wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —"

"— you can't Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds," said Harry quickly. "Hermione Granger told me."

"And she is quite right. We turn left again."

The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on his old colleague so late, but now that conversation had been established, he had more pressing questions to ask.

"Sir, I saw in the Daily Prophet that Fudge has been sacked..."

"Correct," said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side street. "He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Rufus Scrimgeour, who used to be Head of the Auror office."

"Is he... Do you think he's good?" asked Harry.

"An interesting question," said Dumbledore. "He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius."

"Yes, but I meant —"

"I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not under-estimate Lord Voldemort."

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the Daily Prophet had reported, and he did not have the nerve to pursue the subject, so he changed it. "And... sir... I saw about Madam Bones."

"Yes," said Dumbledore quietly. "A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think — ouch."

He had pointed with his injured hand.

"Professor, what happened to your ... ?"

"I have no time to explain now," said Dumbledore. "It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice."

He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

"Sir — I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters..."

"Yes, I received one myself," said Dumbledore, still smiling. "Did you find it useful?"

"Not really."

"No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favorite flavor of jam, to check that I am indeed Professor Dumbledore and not an impostor."

"I didn't..." Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

"For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry... although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to research my own jam preferences before impersonating myself."

"Er... right," said Harry. "Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn't very clear."

"They are corpses," said Dumbledore calmly. "Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard's bidding. Inferi have not been seen for a long time, however, not since Voldemort was last powerful... He killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here..."

They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to have much attention left for anything else, but as they reached the front gate, Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear."

Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

"Wand out and follow me, Harry," he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door very slowly, his wand raised and at the ready.

"Lumos."

Dumbledore's wand tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his illuminated wand aloft, Dumbledore walked into the sitting room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum lying a little farther away like a dropped sword. A piano was on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier flittered nearby. Cushions lay deflated, feathers oozing from slashes in their sides; fragments of glass and china lay like powder over everything. Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was thrown upon the walls, where something darkly red and glutinous was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry's small intake of breath made Dumbledore look around.

"Not pretty, is it?" he said heavily. "Yes, something horrible has happened here."

Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinizing the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing around, half-scared of what he might see hidden behind the wreck of the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

"Maybe there was a fight and — and they dragged him off, Professor?" Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly wounded a man would have to be to leave those stains spattered halfway up the walls.

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

"You mean he's — ?"

"Still here somewhere? Yes."

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, which yelled, "Ouch!"

"Good evening, Horace," said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry's jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, bald, old man who was massaging his lower belly and squinting up at Dumbledore with an aggrieved and watery eye.

"There was no need to stick the wand in that hard," he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. "It hurt."

The wandlight sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver, walruslike mustache, and the highly polished buttons on the maroon velvet jacket he was wearing over a pair of lilac silk pajamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore's chin.

"What gave it away?" he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unabashed for a man who had just been discovered pretending to be an armchair.

"My dear Horace," said Dumbledore, looking amused, "if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house."

The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

"The Dark Mark," he muttered. "Knew there was something... ah well. Wouldn't have had time anyway, I'd only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room."

He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his mustache flutter.

"Would you like my assistance clearing up?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"Please," said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original places; ornaments re-formed in midair, feathers zoomed into their cushions; torn books repaired themselves as they landed upon their shelves; oil lanterns soared onto side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering

across the room and alighted, whole and untarnished, upon a desk; rips, cracks, and holes healed everywhere, and the walls wiped themselves clean.

"What kind of blood was that, incidentally?" asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather clock.

"On the walls? Dragon," shouted the wizard called Horace, as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier screwed itself back into the ceiling.

There was a final plunk from the piano, and silence.

"Yes, dragon," repeated the wizard conversationally. "My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable."

He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick liquid within.

"Hmm. Bit dusty."

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

"Oho," he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry's forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. "Oho!"

"This," said Dumbledore, moving forward to make the introduction, "is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old Friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn."

Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd. "So that's how you thought you'd persuade me, is it? Well, the answer's no, Albus."

He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

"I suppose we can have a drink, at least?" asked Dumbledore. "For old time's sake?"

Slughorn hesitated.

"All right then, one drink," he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him toward a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently impersonated, which stood right beside the newly burning fire and a brightly glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him as visible as possible. Certainly when Slughorn, who had been busy with decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

"Hmpf," he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. "Here —" He gave a drink to Dumbledore, who had sat down without

invitation, thrust the tray at Harry, and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short they did not touch the floor.

"Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not so well," said Slughorn at once. "Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can't move like I used to. Well, that's to be expected. Old age. Fatigue."

"And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice," said Dumbledore. "You can't have had more than three minutes' warning?"

Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, "Two. Didn't hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still," he added sternly, seeming to pull himself back together again, "the fact remains that I'm an old man, Albus. A tired old man who's earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts."

He certainly had those, thought Harry, looking around the room. It was stuffy and cluttered, yet nobody could say it was uncomfortable; there were soft chairs and footstools, drinks and books, boxes of chocolates and plump cushions. If Harry had not known who lived there, he would have guessed at a rich, fussy old lady.

"You're not yet as old as I am, Horace," said Dumbledore.

"Well, maybe you ought to think about retirement yourself," said Slughorn bluntly. His pale gooseberry eyes had found Dumbledore's injured hand. "Reactions not what they were, I see."

"You're quite right," said Dumbledore serenely, shaking back his sleeve to reveal the tips of those burned and blackened ringers; the sight of them made the back of Harry's neck prickle unpleasantly. "I am undoubtedly slower than I was. But on the other hand..."

He shrugged and spread his hands wide, as though to say that age had its compensations, and Harry noticed a ring on his uninjured hand that he had never seen Dumbledore wear before: It was large, rather clumsily made of what looked like gold, and was set with a heavy black stone that had cracked down the middle. Slughorn's eyes lingered for a moment on the ring too, and Harry saw a tiny frown momentarily crease his wide forehead.

"So, all these precautions against intruders, Horace... are they for the Death Eaters' benefit, or mine?" asked Dumbledore.

"What would the Death Eaters want with a poor broken-down old buffer like me?" demanded Slughorn.

"I imagine that they would want you to turn your considerable talents to coercion, torture, and murder," said Dumbledore. "Are you really telling me that they haven't come recruiting yet?"

Slughorn eyed Dumbledore balefully for a moment, then muttered, "I haven't given them the chance. I've been on the move for a year. Never stay in one place more than a week. Move from Mug-gle house to Muggle house — the owners of this place are on holiday in the Canary Islands — it's been very pleasant, I'll be sorry to leave. It's quite easy once you know how, one simple Freezing Charm on these absurd burglar alarms they use instead of Sneako-scopes and make sure the neighbors don't spot you bringing in the piano."

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "But it sounds a rather tiring existence for a broken-down old buffer in search of a quiet life. Now, if you were to return to Hogwarts —"

"If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus! I might have been in hiding, but some funny rumors have reached me since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —"

"Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," said Dumbledore. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to stride into the forest and call a horde of angry centaurs 'filthy half-breeds.'"

"That's what she did, did she?" said Slughorn. "Idiotic woman. Never liked her."

Harry chuckled and both Dumbledore and Slughorn looked round at him.

"Sorry," Harry said hastily. "It's just — I didn't like her either."

Dumbledore stood up rather suddenly.

"Are you leaving?" asked Slughorn at once, looking hopeful.

"No, I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom," said Dumbledore.

"Oh," said Slughorn, clearly disappointed. "Second on the left down the hall."

Dumbledore strode from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, there was silence. After a few moments, Slughorn got to his feet but seemed uncertain what to do with himself. He shot a furtive look at Harry, then crossed to the fire and turned his back on it, warming his wide behind.

"Don't think I don't know why he's brought you," he said abruptly.

Harry merely looked at Slughorn. Slughorn's watery eyes slid over Harry's scar, this time taking in the rest of his face.

"You look very like your father."

"Yeah, I've been told," said Harry.

"Except for your eyes. You've got —"

"My mother's eyes, yeah." Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.

"Hmpf. Yes, well. You shouldn't have favorites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Your mother," Slughorn added, in answer to Harry's questioning look. "Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House. Very cheeky answers I used to get back too."

"Which was your House?"

"I was Head of Slytherin," said Slughorn. "Oh, now," he went on quickly, seeing the expression on Harry's face and wagging a stubby ringer at him, "don't go holding that against me! You'll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done — been in the papers for the last couple of years — died a few weeks ago —"

It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry's intestines and held them tight.

"Well, anyway, he was a big pal of your father's at school. The whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius ended up in Gryffindor! Shame — he was a talented boy. I got his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."

He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who had been outbid at auction. Apparently lost in memories, he gazed at the opposite wall, turning idly on the spot to ensure an even heat on his backside.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good."

"One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year."

"Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?" said Slughorn.

"Not really," said Harry coldly.

Slughorn looked down at him in surprise. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said your mother was one of my all-time favorite students? And there was Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born, a very gifted student, and still gives me excellent inside information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"

He bounced up and down a little, smiling in a self-satisfied way, and pointed at the many glittering photograph frames on the dresser, each peopled with tiny moving occupants.

"All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet, he's always interested to hear my take on the day's news. And

Ambrosius Flume, of Honeydukes — a hamper every birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction to Ciceron Harkiss who gave him his first job! And at the back — you'll see her if you just crane your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies... People are always astonished to hear I'm on first-name terms with the Harpies, and free tickets whenever I want them!"

This thought seemed to cheer him up enormously.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" asked Harry, who could not help wondering why the Death Eaters had not yet tracked down Slughorn if hampers of sweets, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice and opinions could find him.

The smile slid from Slughorn's face as quickly as the blood from his walls.

"Of course not," he said, looking down at Harry. "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year."

Harry had the impression that the words shocked Slughorn himself; he looked quite unsettled for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Still... the prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a post at Hog-warts just now would be tantamount to declaring my public allegiance to the Order of the

Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, I don't personally fancy the mortality rate —"

"You don't have to join the Order to teach at Hogwarts," said Harry, who could not quite keep a note of derision out of his voice: It was hard to sympathize with Slughorn's cosseted existence when he remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave and living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and none of them has ever been killed — well, unless you count Quirrell, and he got what he deserved seeing as he was working with Voldemort."

Harry had been sure Slughorn would be one of those wizards who could not bear to hear Voldemort's name spoken aloud, and was not disappointed: Slughorn gave a shudder and a squawk of protest, which Harry ignored.

"I reckon the staff are safer than most people while Dumble-dore's headmaster; he's supposed to be the only one Voldemort ever feared, isn't he?" Harry went on.

Slughorn gazed into space for a moment or two: He seemed to be thinking over Harry's words.

"Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he muttered grudgingly. "And I suppose one could argue that as I have not joined the Death Kilters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend... in which case, I might well be safer a little closer to Albus... I cannot pretend that Amelia Bones's death did not shake me... If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection..."

Dumbledore reentered the room and Slughorn jumped as though he had forgotten he was in the house.

"Oh, there you are, Albus," he said. "You've been a very long time. Upset stomach?"

"No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines," said Dumbledore. "I do love knitting patterns. Well, Harry, we have trespassed upon Horace's hospitality quite long enough; I think it is time for us to leave."

Not at all reluctant to obey, Harry jumped to his feet. Slughorn sinned taken aback.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, indeed. I think I know a lost cause when I see one."

"Lost...?"

Slughorn seemed agitated. He twiddled his fat thumbs and fidgeted as he watched Dumbledore fasten his traveling cloak, and Harry zip up his jacket.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace," said Dumbledore, raising his uninjured hand in a farewell salute. "Hogwarts would have been glad to see you back again. Our greatly increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to."

"Yes... well... very gracious... as I say..."

"Good-bye, then."

"Bye," said Harry.

They were at the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

"All right, all right, I'll do it!"

Dumbledore turned to see Slughorn standing breathless in the doorway to the sitting room.

"You will come out of retirement?"

"Yes, yes," said Slughorn impatiently. "I must be mad, but yes."

"Wonderful," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Then, Horace, we shall see you on the first of September."

"Yes, I daresay you will," grunted Slughorn.

As they set off down the garden path, Slughorn's voice floated after them, "I'll want a pay rise, Dumbledore!"

Dumbledore chuckled. The garden gate swung shut behind them, and they set off back down the hill through the dark and the swirling mist.

"Well done, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"I didn't do anything," said Harry in surprise.

"Oh yes you did. You showed Horace exactly how much he stands to gain by returning to Hogwarts. Did you like him?"

"Er..."

Harry wasn't sure whether he liked Slughorn or not. He supposed he had been pleasant in his way, but he had also seemed vain and, whatever he said to the contrary, much too surprised that a Muggle-born should make a good witch.

"Horace," said Dumbledore, relieving Harry of the responsibility to say any of this, "likes his comfort. He also likes the company of the famous, the successful, and the powerful. He enjoys the feeling that he influences these people. He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the backseat — more room to spread out, you see. He used to handpick favorites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favorites with himself at the center, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping

some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favorite crystallized pineapple or the chance to recommend the next junior member of the Goblin liaison Office."

Harry had a sudden and vivid mental image of a great swollen spider, spinning a web around it, twitching a thread here and there to bring its large and juicy flies a little closer.

"I tell you all this," Dumbledore continued, "not to turn you against Horace — or, as we must now call him, Professor Slughorn — but to put you on your guard. He will undoubtedly try to collect you, Harry. You would be the jewel of his collection; 'the Boy Who Lived'... or, as they call you these days, 'the Chosen One.'"

At these words, a chill that had nothing to do with the surrounding mist stole over Harry. He was reminded of words he had heard a few weeks ago, words that had a horrible and particular meaning to him: Neither can live while the other survives...

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier.

"This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm."

Braced this time, Harry was ready for the Apparition, but still found it unpleasant. When the pressure disappeared and he found himself able to breathe again, he was standing in a country lane beside Dumbledore and

looking ahead to the crooked silhouette of his second favorite building in the world: the Burrow. In spite of the feeling of dread that had just swept through him, his spirits could not help but lift at the sight of it. Ron was in there... and so was Mrs. Weasley, who could cook better than anyone he knew...

"If you don't mind, Harry," said Dumbledore, as they passed through the gate, "I'd like a few words with you before we part. In private. Perhaps in here?"

Dumbledore pointed toward a run-down stone outhouse where the Weasleys kept their broomsticks. A little puzzled, Harry followed Dumbledore through the creaking door into a space a little smaller than the average cupboard. Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand, so that it glowed like a torch, and smiled down at Harry.

"I hope you will forgive me for mentioning it, Harry, but I am pleased and a little proud at how well you seem to be coping after everything that happened at the Ministry. Permit me to say that I think Sirius would have been proud of you."

Harry swallowed; his voice seemed to have deserted him. He did not think he could stand to discuss Sirius; it had been painful enough to hear Uncle Vernon say "His godfather's dead?" and even worse to hear Siriu's name thrown out casually by Slughorn.

"It was cruel," said Dumbledore softly, "that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship."

Harry nodded, his eyes fixed resolutely on the spider now climbing Dumbledore's hat. He could tell that Dumbledore understood, that he might even suspect that until his letter arrived, Harry had spent nearly all his time at the Dursleys' lying on his bed, refusing meals, and staring at the misted window, full of the chill emptiness i hat he had come to associate with dementors.

"It's just hard," Harry said finally, in a low voice, "to realize he won't write to me again."

His eyes burned suddenly and he blinked. He felt stupid for admitting it, but the fact that he had had someone outside Hogwarts who cared what happened to him, almost like a parent, had been one of the best things about discovering his godfather... and now the post owls would never bring him that comfort again...

"Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before," said Dumbledore gently. "Naturally, the loss is devastat-ing..."

"But while I was at the Dursleys'..." interrupted Harry, his voice growing stronger, "I realized I cant shut myself away or — or crack up. Sirius wouldn't have wanted that, would he? And anyway, life's too short... Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance... It could be me next, couldn't it?"

But if it is," he said fiercely, now looking straight into Dumbledore's blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, "I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it."

"Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!" said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on Harry's back. "I take my hat off to you — or I would, if I were not afraid of showering you in spiders.

"And now, Harry, on a closely related subject... I gather that you have been taking the Daily Prophet over the last two weeks?"

"Yes," said Harry, and his heart beat a little faster.

"Then you will have seen that there have been not so much leaks as floods concerning your adventure in the Hall of Prophecy?"

"Yes," said Harry again. "And now everyone knows that I'm the one —

"No, they do not," interrupted Dumbledore. "There are only two people in the whole world who know the full contents of the prophecy made about you and Lord Voldemort, and they are both standing in this smelly, spidery broom shed. It is true, however, that many have guessed, correctly, that Voldemort sent his Death Eaters to steal a prophecy, and that the prophecy concerned you.

"Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?"

"No," said Harry.

"A wise decision, on the whole," said Dumbledore. "Although I think you ought to relax it in favor of your friends, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger. Yes," he continued, when Harry looked startled, "I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them."

"I didn't want —"

"— to worry or frighten them?" said Dumbledore, surveying Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Or perhaps, to confess that you yourself are worried and frightened? You need your friends, Harry. As you so rightly said, Sirius would not have wanted you to shut yourself away."

Harry said nothing, but Dumbledore did not seem to require an answer. He continued, "On a different, though related, subject, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year."

"Private — with you?" said Harry, surprised out of his preoccupied silence.

"Yes. I think it is time that I took a greater hand in your education."

What will you be teaching me, sir?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," said Dumbledore airily.

Harry waited hopefully, but Dumbledore did not elaborate, so he asked something else that had been bothering him slightly.

"If I'm having lessons with you, I won't have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?"

"Professor Snape, Harry — and no, you will not."

"Good," said Harry in relief, "because they were a —"

He stopped, careful not to say what he really thought.

"I think the word 'fiasco' would be a good one here," said Dumbledore, nodding.

Harry laughed.

"Well, that means I won't see much of Professor Snape from now on," he said, "because he won't let me carry on Potions unless I get 'Outstanding' in my OWL., which I know I haven't."

"Don't count your owls before they are delivered," said Dumbledore gravely. "Which, now I think of it, ought to be some time later today. Now, two more things, Harry, before we part.

"Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts itself. Just in case, you understand me?"

Harry nodded.

"And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. These measures have caused a certain amount of inconvenience to Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind in the slightest, for their only concern is your safety. However, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them."

"I understand," said Harry quickly.

"Very well, then," said Dumbledore, pushing open the broom shed door and stepping out into the yard. "I see a light in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly any longer of the chance to deplore how thin you are."

Chapter 5: An Excess Of Phlegm

Harry and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, which was surrounded by the familiar litter of old Wellington boots and rusty cauldrons; Harry could hear the soft clucking of sleepy chickens coming from a distant shed. Dumbledore knocked three times and Harry saw sudden movement behind the kitchen window.

"Who's there?" said a nervous voice he recognized as Mrs. Weasley's. "Declare yourself!"

"It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Harry."

The door opened at once. There stood Mrs. Weasley, short, plump, and wearing an old green dressing gown.

"Harry, dear! Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!"

"We were lucky," said Dumbledore, ushering Harry over the threshold. "Slughorn proved much more persuadable than I had expected. Harry's doing, of course. Ah, hello, Nymphadora!"

Harry looked around and saw that Mrs. Weasley was not alone, despite the lateness of the hour. A young witch with a pale, heart-shaped face and mousy brown hair was sitting at the table clutching a large mug between her hands.

"Hello, Professor," she said. " Wotcher, Harry."

"Hi, Tonks."

Harry thought she looked drawn, even ill, and there was something forced in her smile. Certainly her appearance was less colorful than usual without her customary shade of bubble-gum-pink hair.

"I'd better be off," she said quickly, standing up and pulling her cloak around her shoulders. "Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly"

"Please don't leave on my account," said Dumbledore courteously, "I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with Rufus Scrimgeour."

"No, no, I need to get going," said Tonks, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. "Night..."

"Dear, why not come to dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming... ?"

"No, really, Molly... thanks anyway... Good night, every-one."

Tonks hurried past Dumbledore and Harry into the yard; a few paces beyond the doorstep, she turned on the spot and vanished into thin air. Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley looked troubled.

"Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant."

He made Mrs. Weasley a bow and followed Tonks, vanishing at precisely the same spot. Mrs. Weasley closed the door on the empty yard and then steered Harry by the shoulders into the full glow of the lantern on the table to examine his appearance.

"You're like Ron," she sighed, looking him up and down. "Both of you look as though you've had Stretching jinxes put on you. I swear Ron's grown four inches since I last bought him school robes. Are you hungry, Harry?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was,

"Sit down, dear, I'll knock something up."

As Harry sat down, a furry ginger cat with a squashed face lumped onto his knees and settled there, purring.

"So Hermione's here?" he asked happily as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ears.

"Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Weasley, rapping a large iron pot with her wand. It bounced onto the stove with a loud clang and began to bubble at once. "Everyone's in bed, of course, we didn't expect you for hours. Here you are..."

She tapped the pot again; it rose into the air, flew toward Harry, and tipped over; Mrs. Weasley slid a bowl nearly beneath it just in time to catch the stream of thick, steaming onion soup.

"Bread, dear?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

She waved her wand over her shoulder; a loaf of bread and a knife soared gracefully onto the table; as the loaf sliced itself and the soup pot dropped back onto the stove, Mrs. Weasley sat down opposite him.

"So you persuaded Horace Slughorn to take the job?"

Harry nodded, his mouth so full of hot soup that he could not speak.

"He taught Arthur and me," said Mrs. Weasley. "He was at Hog-warts for ages, started around the same time as Dumbledore, I think. Did you like him?"

His mouth now full of bread, Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head.

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Weasley, nodding wisely. "Of course he can be charming when he wants to be, but Arthur's never liked him much. The Ministry's littered with Slughorn's old favorites, he was always good at giving leg ups, but he never had much time for Arthur... didn't seem to think

he was enough of a highflier. Well, that just shows you, even Slughorn makes mistakes. I don't know whether Ron's told you in any of his letters... it's only just happened... but Arthur's been promoted!"

It could not have been clearer that Mrs. Weasley had been bursting to say this.

Harry swallowed a large amount of very hot soup and thought he could feel his throat blistering. "That's great!" he gasped.

"You are sweet," beamed Mrs. Weasley, possibly taking his watering eyes for emotion at the news. "Yes, Rufus Scrimgeour has set up several new offices in response to the present situation, and Arthur's heading the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. It's a big job, he's got ten people reporting to him now!"

"What exactly?"

"Well, you see, in all the panic about You-Know-Who, odd things have been cropping up for sale everywhere, things that are supposed to guard against You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters. You can imagine the kind of thing... so-called protective potions that are really gravy with a bit of bubotuber pus added, or instructions for defensive jinxes that actually make your ears fall off... Well, in the main the perpetrators are just people like Mundungus Hotelier, who've never done an honest day's work in their lives and are taking advantage of how frightened everybody is, but every now and then something really nasty turns up. The other day Arthur confiscated a box

of cursed Sneakoscopes that were almost certainly planted by a Death Eater. So you see, it's a very important job, and I tell him it's just silly to miss dealing with spark plugs and toasters and all the rest of that Muggle rubbish." Mrs. Weasley ended her speech with a stern look, as if it had been Harry suggesting that it was natural to miss spark plugs.

"Is Mr. Weasley still at work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. As a matter of fact, he's a tiny bit late... He said he'd be back around midnight..."

She turned to look at a large clock that was perched awkwardly on top of a pile of sheets in the washing basket at the end of the table. Harry recognized it at once: It had nine hands, each inscribed with the name of a family member, and usually hung on the Weasleys' sitting room wall, though its current position suggested that Mrs. Weasley had taken to carrying it around the house with her. Every single one of its nine hands was now pointing at "mortal peril."

"It's been like that for a while now," said Mrs. Weasley, in an unconvincingly casual voice, "ever since You-Know-Who came back into the open. I suppose everybody's in mortal danger now... I don't think it can be just our family... but I don't know anyone else who's got a clock like this, so I can't check. Oh!"

With a sudden exclamation she pointed at the clock's face. Mr. Weasley's hand had switched to "traveling."

"He's coming!"

And sure enough, a moment later there was a knock on the back door. Mrs. Weasley jumped up and hurried to it; with one hand on the doorknob and her face pressed against the wood she called softly, "Arthur, is that you?"

"Yes," came Mr. Weasley's weary voice. "But I would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!"

"Oh, honestly..."

"Molly!"

"All right, all right... What is your dearest ambition?"

"To find out how airplanes stay up."

Mrs. Weasley nodded and turned the doorknob, but apparently Mr. Weasley was holding tight to it on the other side, because the door remained firmly shut.

"Molly! I've got to ask you your question first!"

"Arthur, really, this is just silly..."

"What do you like me to call you when we're alone together?"

Even by the dim light of the lantern Harry could tell that Mrs. Weasley had turned bright red; he himself felt suddenly warm around the ears and neck, and hastily gulped soup, clattering his spoon as loudly as he could against the bowl.

"Mollywobbles," whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack at the edge of the door.

"Correct," said Mr. Weasley. "Now you can let me in."

Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired wizard wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a long and dusty traveling cloak.

"I still don't see why we have to go through that every time you come home," said Mrs. Weasley, still pink in the face as she helped her husband out of his cloak. "I mean, a Death Eater might have forced the answer out of you before impersonating you!"

"I know, dear, but it's Ministry procedure, and I have to set an example. Something smells good... onion soup?"

Mr. Weasley turned hopefully in the direction of the table.

"Harry! We didn't expect you until morning!"

They shook hands, and Mr. Weasley dropped into the chair beside Harry as Mrs. Weasley set a bowl of soup in front of him too.

"Thanks, Molly. It's been a tough night. Some idiot's started selling Metamorph-Medals. Just sling them around your neck and you'll be able to change your appearance at will. A hundred thousand disguises, all for ten Galleons!"

"And what really happens when you put them on?"

"Mostly you just turn a fairly unpleasant orange color, but a couple of people have also sprouted tentacle like warts all over their bodies. As if St. Mungo's didn't have enough to do already!"

"It sounds like the sort of thing Fred and George would find funny," said Mrs. Weasley hesitantly. "Are you sure...?"

"Of course I am!" said Mr. Weasley. "The boys wouldn't do anything like that now, not when people are desperate for protection!"

"So is that why you're late, Metamorph-Medals?"

"No, we got wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down in Elephant and Castle, but luckily the Magical Law Enforcement Squad had sorted it out by the time we got there..."

Harry stifled a yawn behind his hand.

"Bed," said an undeceived Mrs. Weasley at once. "I've got Fred and George's room all ready for you, you'll have it to yourself."

"Why, where are they?"

"Oh, they're in Diagon Alley, sleeping in the little flat over their joke shop as they're so busy," said Mrs. Weasley. "I must say, I didn't approve at first, but they do seem to have a bit of a flair for business! Come on, dear, your trunks already up there."

"Night, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, pushing back his chair. Crookshanks leapt lightly from his lap and slunk out of the room.

"G'night, Harry," said Mr. Weasley.

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock in the washing basket as they left the kitchen. All the hands were once again at "mortal peril."

Fred and George's bedroom was on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at a lamp on the bedside table and it ignited at once, bathing the room in a pleasant golden glow. Though a large vase of flowers had been placed on a desk in front of the small window, their perfume could not disguise the lingering smell of what Harry thought was gunpowder. A considerable amount of floor space was devoted to a vast number of unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes, amongst which stood Harry's school

trunk. The room looked as though it was being used as a temporary warehouse.

Hedwig hooted happily at Harry from her perch on top of a large wardrobe, then took off through the window; Harry knew she had been waiting to see him before going hunting. Harry bade Mrs. Weasley good night, put on pajamas, and got into one of the beds. There was something hard inside the pillowcase. He groped inside it and pulled out a sticky purple-and-orange sweet, which he recognized as a Puking Pastille. Smiling to himself, he rolled over and was instantly asleep.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Harry, he was awakened by what sounded like cannon fire as the door burst open. Sitting bolt upright, he heard the rasp of the curtains being pulled back: The dazzling sunlight seemed to poke him hard in both eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he groped hopelessly for his glasses with the other.

"Wuzzgoionon?"

"We didn't know you were here already!" said a loud and excited voice, and he received a sharp blow to the top of the head.

"Ron, don't hit him!" said a girl's voice reproachfully.

Harry's hand found his glasses and he shoved them on, though I he light was so bright he could hardly see anyway. A long, looming shadow quivered

in front of him for a moment; he blinked and Ron Weasley came into focus, grinning down at him.

"All right?"

"Never been better," said Harry, rubbing the top of his head and slumping back onto his pillows. "You?"

"Not bad," said Ron, pulling over a cardboard box and sitting on it. "When did you get here? Mum's only just told us!"

"About one o'clock this morning."

"Were the Muggles all right? Did they treat you okay?"

"Same as usual," said Harry, as Hermione perched herself on the edge of his bed, "they didn't talk to me much, but I like it better that way. How're you, Hermione?"

"Oh, I'm fine," said Hermione, who was scrutinizing Harry as though he was sickening for something. He thought he knew what was behind this, and as he had no wish to discuss Sirius's death or any other miserable subject at the moment, he said, "What's the time? Have I missed breakfast?"

"Don't worry about that, Mum's bringing you up a tray; she reckons you look underfed," said Ron, rolling his eyes. "So, what's been going on?"

"Nothing much, I've just been stuck at my aunt and uncle's, haven't I?"

"Come off it!" said Ron. "You've been off with Dumbledore!"

"It wasn't that exciting. He just wanted me to help him persuade this old teacher to come out of retirement. His name's Horace Slughorn."

"Oh," said Ron, looking disappointed. "We thought..."

Hermione flashed a warning look at Ron, and Ron changed tack at top speed.

"...we thought it'd be something like that."

"You did?" said Harry, amused.

"Yeah... yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don't we? So, er, what's he like?"

"He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be Head of Slytherin," said Harry. "Something wrong, Hermione?"

She was watching him as though expecting strange symptoms to manifest themselves at any moment. She rearranged her features hastily in an unconvincing smile.

"No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he'll be a good teacher?"

"Dunno," said Harry. "He can't be worse than Umbridge, can he?"

"I know someone who's worse than Umbridge," said a voice from the doorway. Ron's younger sister slouched into the room, looking irritable. "Hi, Harry."

"What's up with you?" Ron asked.

"It's her," said Ginny, plonking herself down on Harry's bed. "She's driving me mad."

"What's she done now?" asked Hermione sympathetically.

"It's the way she talks to me... you'd think I was about three!"

"I know," said Hermione, dropping her voice. "She's so full of herself."

Harry was astonished to hear Hermione talking about Mrs. Weasley like this and could not blame Ron for saying angrily, "Can't you two lay off her for five seconds?"

"Oh, that's right, defend her," snapped Ginny. "We all know you can't get enough of her."

This seemed an odd comment to make about Ron's mother. Starting to feel that he was missing something, Harry said, "Who are you... ?"

But his question was answered before he could finish it. The bedroom door flew open again, and Harry instinctively yanked the bedcovers up to his chin so hard that Hermione and Ginny slid off the bed onto the floor.

A young woman was standing in the doorway, a woman of such breathtaking beauty that the room seemed to have become strangely airless. She was tall and willowy with long blonde hair and appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. To complete this vision of perfection, she was carrying a heavily laden breakfast tray.

"'Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"

As she swept over the threshold toward him, Mrs. Weasley was revealed, bobbing along in her wake, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!"

"Eet was no trouble," said Fleur Delacour, setting the tray across Harry's knees and then swooping to kiss him on each cheek: He felt the places where her mouth had touched him burn. "I 'ave been longing to see 'im. You remember my seester, Gabrielle? She never stops talking about 'Arry Potter. She will be delighted to see you again."

"Oh... is she here too?" Harry croaked.

"No, no, silly boy," said Fleur with a tinkling laugh, "I mean next summer, when we... but do you not know?"

Her great blue eyes widened and she looked reproachfully at Mrs. Weasley, who said, "We hadn't got around to telling him yet."

Fleur turned back to Harry, swinging her silvery sheet of hair so that it whipped Mrs. Weasley across the face.

"Bill and I are going to be married!"

"Oh," said Harry blankly. He could not help noticing how Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, and Ginny were all determinedly avoiding one another's gaze. "Wow. Er... congratulations!"

She swooped down upon him and kissed him again.

"Bill is very busy at ze moment, working very 'ard, and I only work part-time at Gringotts for my Eenglish, so he brought me 'ere for a few days to get to know 'is family properly. I was so pleased to 'ear you would be coming... zere isn't much to do 'ere, unless you like cooking and chickens! Well... enjoy your breakfast, 'Arry!"

With these words she turned gracefully and seemed to float out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Mrs. Weasley made a noise that sounded like, "tchah!"

"Mum hates her," said Ginny quietly.

"I do not hate her!" said Mrs. Weasley in a cross whisper. "I just think they've hurried into this engagement, that's all!"

"They've known each other a year," said Ron, who looked oddly groggy and was staring at the closed door.

"Well, that's not very long! I know why it's happened, of course. Its all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back, people think they might be dead tomorrow, so they're rushing all sorts of decisions they'd normally take time over. It was the same last time he was powerful, people eloping left, right, and center..."

"Including you and Dad," said Ginny slyly.

"Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Whereas Bill and Fleur... well... what have they really got in common? He's a hardworking, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she's..."

"A cow," said Ginny, nodding. "But Bill's not that down-to-earth. He's a Curse-Breaker, isn't he, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour... I expect that's why he's gone for Phlegm."

"Stop calling her that, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Harry and Hermione laughed. "Well, I'd better get on... Eat your eggs while they're warm, Harry."

Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron still seemed slightly punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally like a dog trying to rid its ears of water.

"Don't you get used to her if she's staying in the same house?" Harry asked.

"Well, you do," said Ron, "but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly, like then..."

"It's pathetic," said Hermione furiously, striding away from Ron as far as she could go and turning to face him with her arms folded once she had reached the wall.

"You don't really want her around forever?" Ginny asked Ron incredulously. When he merely shrugged, she said, "Well, Mum's going to put a stop to it if she can, I bet you anything."

"How's she going to manage that?" asked Harry.

"She keeps trying to get Tonks round for dinner. I think she's hoping Bill will fall for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I'd much rather have her in the family."

"Yeah, that'll work," said Ron sarcastically. "Listen, no bloke in his right mind's going to fancy Tonks when Fleur's around. I mean, Tonks is okay-looking when she isn't doing stupid things to her hair and her nose, but..."

"She's a damn sight nicer than Phlegm?" said Ginny.

"And she's more intelligent, she's an Auror!" said Hermione from the corner.

"Fleur's not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament," said Harry.

"Not you as well!" said Hermione bitterly.

"I suppose you like the way Phlegm says 'Any,' do you?" asked Ginny scornfully.

"No," said Harry, wishing he hadn't spoken, "I was just saying, Phlegm... I mean, Fleur..."

"I'd much rather have Tonks in the family," said Ginny. "At least she's a laugh."

"She hasn't been much of a laugh lately," said Ron. "Every time I've seen her she's looked more like Moaning Myrtle."

"That's not fair," snapped Hermione. "She still hasn't got over what happened... you know... I mean, he was her cousin!"

Harry's heart sank. They had arrived at Sirius. He picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth, hoping to deflect any invitation to join in this part of the conversation.

"Tonks and Sirius barely knew each other!" said Ron. "Sirius was in Azkaban half her life and before that their families never met..."

"That's not the point," said Hermione. "She thinks it was her limit he died!"

"How does she work that one out?" asked Harry, in spite of himself.

"Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange, wasn't she? I think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix couldn't have killed Sirius."

"That's stupid," said Ron.

"It's survivor's guilt," said Hermione. "I know Lupin's tried to talk her round, but she's still really down. She's actually having trouble with her Metamorphosing!"

"With her...?"

"She can't change her appearance like she used to," explained Hermione. "I think her powers must have been affected by shock, or something."

"I didn't know that could happen," said Harry.

"Nor did I," said Hermione, "but I suppose if you're really depressed..."

The door opened again and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. "Ginny," she whispered, "come downstairs and help me with the lunch."

"I'm talking to this lot!" said Ginny, outraged.

"Now!" said Mrs. Weasley, and withdrew.

"She only wants me there so she doesn't have to be alone with Phlegm!" said Ginny crossly. She swung her long red hair around in a very good imitation of Fleur and pranced across the room with her arms held aloft like a ballerina.

"You lot had better come down quickly too," she said as she left.

Harry took advantage of the temporary silence to eat more breakfast. Hermione was peering into Fred and George's boxes, though every now and then she cast sideways looks at Harry. Ron, who was now helping himself to Harry...s toast, was still gazing dreamily at the door.

"What's this?" Hermione asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

"Dunno," said Ron, "but if Fred and George left it here, it's probably not ready for the joke shop yet, so be careful"

"Your mum said the shop's going well," said Harry. "Said Fred and George have got a real flair for business."

"That's an understatement," said Ron. "They're raking in the Galleons! I can't wait to see the place, we haven't been to Diagon Alley yet, because Mum says Dad's got to be there for extra security and he's been really busy at work, but it sounds excellent."

"And what about Percy?" asked Harry; the third-eldest Weasley brother had fallen out with the rest of the family. "Is he talking to your mum and dad again?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"But he knows your dad was right all along now about Voldemort being back..."

"Dumbledore says people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right," said Hermione. "I heard him telling your mum, Ron."

"Sounds like the sort of mental thing Dumbledore would say," said Ron.

"He's going to be giving me private lessons this year," said Harry conversationally.

Ron choked on his bit of toast, and Hermione gasped.

"You kept that quiet!" said Ron.

"I only just remembered," said Harry honestly. "He told me last night in your broom shed."

"Blimey... private lessons with Dumbledore!" said Ron, looking impressed. "I wonder why he's... ?"

His voice tailed away. Harry saw him and Hermione exchange looks. Harry laid down his knife and fork, his heart beating rather fast considering that all he was doing was sitting in bed. Dumbledore had said to do it... Why not now? He fixed his eyes on his fork, which was gleaming in the sunlight streaming into his lap, and said, "I don't know exactly why he's going to be giving me lessons, but I think it must be because of the prophecy."

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both had frozen. He continued, still speaking to his fork, "You know, the one they were trying to steal at the Ministry."

"Nobody knows what it said, though," said Hermione quickly. "It got smashed."

"Although the Prophet says..." began Ron, but Hermione said, "Shh!"

"The Prophet's got it right," said Harry, looking up at them both with a great effort: Hermione seemed frightened and Ron amazed. "That glass ball that smashed wasn't the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore's office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he could tell me. From what it said," Harry took a deep breath, "it looks like I'm the one who's got to finish off Voldemort... At least, it said neither of us could live while the other survives."

The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Hermione vanished behind a puff of black smoke.

"Hermione!" shouted Harry and Ron; the breakfast tray slid to the floor with a crash.

Hermione emerged, coughing, out of the smoke, clutching the telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple black eye.

"I squeezed it and it... it punched me!" she gasped.

And sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from the end of the telescope.

"Don't worry," said Ron, who was plainly trying not to laugh, "Mum'll fix that, she's good at healing minor injuries..."

"Oh well, never mind that now!" said Hermione hastily. "Harry, oh, Harry..."

She sat down on the edge of his bed again.

"We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry... Obviously, we didn't want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Malfoy said about the prophecy, how it was about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this... Oh, Harry..." She stared at him, then whispered, "Are you scared?"

"Not as much as I was," said Harry. "When I first heard it, I was... but now, it seems as though I always knew I'd have to face him in the end..."

"When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something to do with the prophecy," said Ron eagerly. "And we were kind of right, weren't we? He wouldn't be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn't waste his time... he must think you've got a chance!"

"That's true," said Hermione. "I wonder what he'll teach you, Harry? Really advanced defensive magic, probably... powerful countercurses... anti-jinxes..."

Harry did not really listen. A warmth was spreading through him that had nothing to do with the sunlight; a tight obstruction in his chest seemed to be dissolving. He knew that Ron and Hermione were more shocked than they were letting on, but the mere fact that they were still there on either side of him, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them.

"...and evasive enchantments generally," concluded Hermione. "Well, at least you know one lesson you'll be having this year, that's one more than Ron and me. I wonder when our OWL results will come?"

"Cant be long now, it's been a month," said Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry, as another part of last night's conversation came back to him. "I think Dumbledore said our OWL results would be arriving today!"

"Today?" shrieked Hermione. "Today? But why didn't you... oh my God... you should have said..."

She leapt to her feet.

"I'm going to see whether any owls have come..."

But when Harry arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying his empty breakfast tray, it was to find Hermione sitting at the

kitchen table in great agitation, while Mrs. Weasley tried to lessen her resemblance to half a panda.

"It just won't budge," Mrs. Weasley was saying anxiously, standing over Hermione with her wand in her hand and a copy of *The Healer's Helpmate* open at "Bruises, Cuts, and Abrasions." "This has always worked before, I just can't understand it."

"It'll be Fred and George's idea of a funny joke, making sure it can't come off," said Ginny.

"But it's got to come off!" squeaked Hermione. "I can't go around looking like this forever!"

"You won't, dear, we'll find an antidote, don't worry," said Mrs. Weasley soothingly.

"Bill told me W Fred and George are very amusing!" said Fleur, smiling serenely.

"Yes, I can hardly breathe for laughing," snapped Hermione.

She jumped up and started walking round and round the kitchen, twisting her fingers together.

"Mrs. Weasley, you're quite, quite sure no owls have arrived this morning?"

"Yes, dear, I'd have noticed," said Mrs. Weasley patiently. "But it's barely nine, there's still plenty of time..."

"I know I messed up Ancient Runes," muttered Hermione feverishly, "I definitely made at least one serious mistranslation. And the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was no good at all. I thought Transfiguration went all right at the time, but looking back..."

"Hermione, will you shut up, you're not the only one who's nervous!" barked Ron. "And when you've got your eleven 'Outstanding OWLs...'"

"Don't, don't, don't!" said Hermione, flapping her hands hysterically. "I know I've failed everything!"

"What happens if we fail?" Harry asked the room at large, but it was again Hermione who answered.

"We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall at the end of last term."

Harry's stomach squirmed. He wished he had eaten less breakfast.

"At Beauxbatons," said Fleur complacently, "we 'ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat our examinations after six years of study, not five, and then..."

Fleur's words were drowned in a scream. Hermione was pointing through the kitchen window. Three black specks were clearly visible in the sky, growing larger all the time.

"They're definitely owls," said Ron hoarsely, jumping up to join Hermione at the window.

"And there are three of them," said Harry, hastening to her other side.

"One for each of us," said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Oh no... oh no... oh no..."

She gripped both Harry and Ron tightly around the elbows.

The owls were flying directly at the Burrow, three handsome tawnies, each of which, it became clear as they flew lower over the path leading up to the house, was carrying a large square envelope.

"Oh no!" squealed Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley squeezed past them and opened the kitchen window. One, two, three, the owls soared through it and landed on the table in a neat line. All three of them lifted their right legs.

Harry moved forward. The letter addressed to him was tied to the leg of the owl in the middle. He untied it with fumbling fingers. To his left, Ron

was trying to detach his own results; to his right, Hermione's hands were shaking so much she was making her whole owl tremble.

Nobody in the kitchen spoke. At last, Harry managed to detach the envelope. He slit it open quickly and unfolded the parchment inside.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results

Pass Grades:

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades:

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy A

Care of Magical Creatures E

Charms E

Defense Against the Dark Arts O

Divination P

Herbology E

History of Magic D

Potions E

Transfiguration E

Harry read the parchment through several times, his breathing becoming easier with each reading. It was all right: He had always known that he would fail Divination, and he had had no chance of passing History of Magic, given that he had collapsed halfway through the examination, but he had passed everything else! He ran his finger down the grades... he had passed well in Transfiguration and Herbology, he had even exceeded

expectations at Potions! And best of all, he had achieved "Outstanding" at Defense Against the Dark Arts!

He looked around. Hermione had her back to him and her head bent, but Ron was looking delighted.

"Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?" he said happily to Harry. "Here... swap..."

Harry glanced down Ron's grades: There were no "Outstandings" there...

"Knew you'd be top at Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Ron, punching Harry on the shoulder. "We've done all right, haven't we?"

"Well done!" said Mrs. Weasley proudly, ruffling Ron's hair. "Seven OWLs, that's more than Fred and George got together!"

"Hermione?" said Ginny tentatively, for Hermione still hadn't turned around. "How did you do?"

"I--not bad," said Hermione in a small voice.

"Oh, come off it," said Ron, striding over to her and whipping her results out of her hand. "Yep... ten 'Outstandings' and one 'Exceeds Expectations' at Defense Against the Dark Arts." He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're actually disappointed, aren't you?"

Hermione shook her head, but Harry laughed.

"Well, we're N.E.W.T. students now!" grinned Ron. "Mum, are there any more sausages?"

Harry looked back down at his results. They were as good as he could have hoped for. He felt just one tiny twinge of regret... This was the end of his ambition to become an Auror. He had not secured the required Potions grade. He had known all along that he wouldn't, but he still felt a sinking in his stomach as he looked again at that small black E.

It was odd, really, seeing that it had been a Death Eater in disguise who had first told Harry he would make a good Auror, but somehow the idea had taken hold of him, and he couldn't really think of anything else he would like to be. Moreover, it had seemed the right destiny for him since he had heard the prophecy a few weeks ago... Neither can live while the other survives...Wouldn't he be living up to the prophecy, and giving himself the best chance of survival, if he joined those highly trained wizards whose job it was to find and kill Voldemort?

Chapter 6: Draco's Detour

Harry remained within the confines of the Burrow's garden over the next few weeks. He spent most of his days playing two-a-side Quidditch in the Weasleys' orchard (he and Hermione against Ron and Ginny; Hermione was dreadful and Ginny good, so they were reasonably well matched) and his evenings eating triple helpings of everything Mrs. Weasley put in front of him.

It would have been a happy, peaceful holiday had it not been for the stones of disappearances, odd accidents, even of deaths now appearing almost daily in the Prophet. Sometimes Bill and Mr. Weasley brought home news before it even reached the paper. To Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, Harry's sixteenth birthday celebrations were marred by grisly tidings brought to the party by Remus Lupin, who was looking gaunt and grim, his brown hair streaked liberally with gray, his clothes more ragged and patched than ever.

"There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he announced, as Mrs. Weasley passed him a large slice of birthday cake. "And they've found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it... well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius's brother, Regulus, only managed a few days as far as I can remember."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning, "perhaps we should talk about something diff..."

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" asked Bill, who was being plied with wine by Fleur. "The man who ran..."

"Is the ice-cream place in Diagon Alley?" Harry interrupted, with an unpleasant, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. "He used to give me free ice creams. What's happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"Why?" asked Ron, while Mrs. Weasley pointedly glared at Bill.

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow. He was a good man, Florean."

"Talking of Diagon Alley," said Mr. Weasley, "looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" said Ginny, looking startled.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

"But what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," said Lupin. "But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not so good for us."

The day after this rather gloomy birthday tea, their letters and booklists arrived from Hogwarts. Harry's included a surprise: he had been made Quidditch Captain.

"That gives you equal status with prefects!" cried Hermione happily. "You can use our special bathroom now and everything!"

"Wow, I remember when Charlie wore one of these," said Ron, examining the badge with glee. "Harry, this is so cool, you're my Captain... if you let me back on the team, I suppose, ha ha..."

"Well, I don't suppose we can put off a trip to Diagon Alley much longer now you've got these," sighed Mrs. Weasley, looking down Ron...s booklist. "We'll go on Saturday as long as your father doesn't have to go into work again. I'm not going there without him."

"Mum, d'you honestly think You-Know-Who's going to be hiding behind a bookshelf in Flourish and Blotts?" sniggered Ron.

"Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they?" said Mrs. Weasley, firing up at once. "If you think security's a laughing matter you can stay behind and I'll get your things myself..."

"No, I wanna come, I want to see Fred and George's shop!" said Ron hastily.

"Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you're too immature to come with us!" said Mrs. Weasley angrily, snatching up her clock, all nine hands of which were still pointing at "mortal peril," and balancing it on top of a pile of just-laundered towels. "And that goes for returning to Hogwarts as well!"

Ron turned to stare incredulously at Harry as his mother hoisted the laundry basket and the teetering clock into her arms and stormed out of the room.

"Blimey... you can't even make a joke round here anymore..."

But Ron was careful not to be flippant about Voldemort over the next few days. Saturday dawned without any more outbursts from Mrs. Weasley, though she seemed very tense at breakfast. Bill, who would be staying at home with Fleur (much to Hermione and Ginny's pleasure), passed a full money bag across the table to Harry.

"Where's mine?" demanded Ron at once, his eyes wide.

"That's already Harry's, idiot," said Bill. "I got it out of your vault for you, Harry, because it's taking about five hours for the public to get to their gold at the moment, the goblins have tightened security so much. Two days ago

Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his... Well, trust me, this way's easier."

"Thanks, Bill," said Harry, pocketing his gold.

"E is always so thoughtful," purred Fleur adoringly, stroking Bill's nose. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal behind Fleur. Harry choked over his cornflakes, and Ron thumped him on the back.

It was an overcast, murky day. One of the special Ministry of Magic cars, in which Harry had ridden once before, was awaiting them in the front yard when they emerged from the house, pulling on their cloaks.

"It's good Dad can get us these again," said Ron appreciatively, stretching luxuriously as the car moved smoothly away from the Burrow, Bill and Fleur waving from the kitchen window. He, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were all sitting in roomy comfort in the wide backseat.

"Don't get used to it, it's only because of Harry," said Mr. Weasley over his shoulder. He and Mrs. Weasley were in front with the Ministry driver; the front passenger seat had obligingly stretched into what resembled a two-seater sofa. "He's been given top-grade security status. And we'll be joining up with additional security at the Leaky Cauldron too."

Harry said nothing; he did not much fancy doing his shopping while surrounded by a battalion of Aurors. He had stowed his Invisibility Cloak in his backpack and felt that, if that was good enough for Dumbledore, it ought

to be good enough for the Ministry, though now he came to think of it, he was not sure the Ministry knew about his cloak.

"Here you are, then," said the driver, a surprisingly short while later, speaking for the first time as he slowed in Charing Cross Road and stopped outside the Leaky Cauldron. "I'm to wait for you, any idea how long you'll be?"

"A couple of hours, I expect," said Mr. Weasley. "Ah, good, he's here!"

Harry imitated Mr. Weasley and peered through the window; his heart leapt. There were no Aurors waiting outside the inn, but instead the gigantic, black-bearded form of Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, wearing a long beaverskin coat, beaming at the sight of Harry's face and oblivious to the startled stares of passing Muggles.

"Harry!" he boomed, sweeping Harry into a bone-crushing hug the moment Harry had stepped out of the car. "Buckbeak... Witherwings, I mean... yeh should see him, Harry, he's so happy ter be back in the open air..."

"Glad he's pleased," said Harry, grinning as he massaged his ribs. "We didn't know 'security' meant you!"

"I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do," said Hagrid proudly, throwing

out his chest and tucking his thumbs into his pockets. "Lets get goin' then... after yeh, Molly, Arthur..."

The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in Harry's memory, completely empty. Only Tom the landlord, wizened and toothless, remained of the old crowd. He looked up hopefully as they entered, but before he could speak, Hagrid said importantly, "Jus' passin' through today, Tom, sure yeh understand, Hogwarts business, yeh know."

Tom nodded gloomily and returned to wiping glasses; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, and the Weasleys walked through the bar and out into the chilly little courtyard at the back where the dustbins stood. Hagrid raised his pink umbrella and rapped a certain brick in the wall, which opened at once to form an archway onto a winding cobbled street. They stepped through the entrance and paused, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were lost to view, hidden behind the large Ministry of Magic posters that had been pasted over them. Most of these somber purple posters carried blown-up versions of the security advice on the Ministry pamphlets that had been sent out over the summer, but others bore moving black-and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the front of the nearest apothecary. A few windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. On the other hand, a number of shabby-looking stalls had sprung up along the street. The nearest one,

which had been erected outside Flourish and Blotts, under a striped, stained awning, had a cardboard sign pinned to its front:

AMULETS

Effective Against Werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi!

A seedy-looking little wizard was rattling armfuls of silver symbols on chains at passersby.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called at Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck?"

"If I were on duty..." said Mr. Weasley, glaring angrily at the amulet seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry," said Mrs. Weasley, nervously consulting a list. "I think we'd better do Madam Malkin's first, Hermione wants new dress robes, and Ron's showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you must need new ones too, Harry, you've grown so much... come on, everyone..."

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's," said Mr. Weasley. "Why don't those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone's school-books?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, clearly torn between a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to stick together in a pack. "Hagrid, do you think...- ?"

"Don't fret, they'll be fine with me, Molly," said Hagrid soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley did not look entirely convinced, but allowed the separation, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband and Ginny while Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid set off for Madam Malkin's.

Harry noticed that many of the people who passed them had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley, and that nobody was stopping to talk anymore; the shoppers stayed together in their own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. Nobody seemed to be shopping alone.

"Migh' be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us," said Hagrid, stopping outside Madam Malkin's and bending down to peer through the window. "I'll stand guard outside, all right?"

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had the door swung shut behind them than they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.

"... not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, "Now, dear, your mother's quite right, none of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore, it's nothing to do with being a child..."

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

A teenage boy with a pale, pointed face and white-blond hair appeared from behind the rack, wearing a handsome set of dark green robes that glittered with pins around the hem and the edges of the sleeves. He strode to the mirror and examined himself; it was a few moments before he noticed Harry, Ron, and Hermione reflected over his shoulder. His light gray eyes narrowed.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," said Draco Malfoy.

"I don't think there's any need for language like that!" said Madam Malkin, scurrying out from behind the clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand. "And I don't want wands drawn in my shop either!" she added hastily, for a glance toward the door had shown her Harry and Ron both standing there with their wands out and pointing at Malfoy. Hermione, who was standing slightly behind them, whispered, "No, don't, honestly, it's not worth it. "

"Yeah, like you'd dare do magic out of school," sneered Malfoy. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers."

"That's quite enough!" said Madam Malkin sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. "Madam, please!"

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack.

"Put those away," she said coldly to Harry and Ron. "If you at-tack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

"Really?" said Harry, taking a step forward and gazing into the smoothly arrogant face that, for all its pallor, still resembled her sister's. He was as tall as she was now. "Going to get a few Death Eater pals to do us in, are you?"

Madam Malkin squealed and clutched at her heart.

"Really, you shouldn't accuse... dangerous thing to say... wands away, please!"

But Harry did not lower his wand. Narcissa Malfoy smiled unpleasantly.

"I see that being Dumbledore's favorite has given you a false sense of security, Harry Potter. But Dumbledore won't always be there to protect you."

Harry looked mockingly all around the shop. "Wow... look at that... he's not here now! So why not have a go? They might be able to find you a double cell in Azkaban with your loser of a husband!"

Malfoy made an angry movement toward Harry, but stumbled over his overlong robe. Ron laughed loudly.

"Don't you dare talk to my mother like that, Potter!" Malfoy snarled.

"It's all right, Draco," said Narcissa, restraining him with her thin white fingers upon his shoulder. "I expect Potter will be reunited with dear Sirius before I am reunited with Lucius."

Harry raised his wand higher.

"Harry, no!" moaned Hermione, grabbing his arm and attempting to push it down by his side. "Think... You mustn't... You'll be in such trouble..."

Madam Malkin dithered for a moment on the spot, then seemed to decide to act as though nothing was happening in the hope that it wouldn't. She bent toward Malfoy, who was still glaring at Harry.

"I think this left sleeve could come up a little bit more, dear, let me just..."

"Ouch!" bellowed Malfoy, slapping her hand away. "Watch where you're putting your pins, woman! Mother, I don't think I want these anymore."

He pulled the robes over his head and threw them onto the floor at Madam Malkin's feet.

"You're right, Draco," said Narcissa, with a contemptuous glance at Hermione, "now I know the kind of scum that shops here... We'll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting's."

And with that, the pair of them strode out of the shop, Malfoy taking care to bang as hard as he could into Ron on the way out.

"Well, really?" said Madam Malkin, snatching up the fallen robes and moving the tip of her wand over them like a vacuum cleaner, so that it removed all the dust.

She was distracted all through the fitting of Ron's and Harry's new robes, tried to sell Hermione wizard's dress robes instead of witch's, and when she finally bowed them out of the shop it was with an air of being glad to see the back of them.

"Got ev'rything?" asked Hagrid brightly when they reappeared at his side.

"Just about," said Harry. "Did you see the Malfoys?"

"Yeah," said Hagrid, unconcerned. "Bu they wouldn't... dare make trouble in the middle o' Diagon Alley, Harry. Don' worry about them."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks, but before they could disabuse Hagrid of this comfortable notion, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny appeared, all clutching heavy packages of books.

"Everyone all right?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Got your robes? Right then, we can pop in at the Apothecary and Eeylops on the way to Fred and George's... stick close, now..."

Neither Harry nor Ron bought any ingredients at the Apothecary, seeing that they were no longer studying Potions, but both bought large boxes of owl nuts for Hedwig and Pigwidgeon at Eeylops Owl Emporium. Then, with Mrs. Weasley checking her watch every minute or so, they headed farther along the street in search of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the joke shop run by Fred and George.

"We really haven't got too long," Mrs. Weasley said. "So we'll just have a quick look around and then back to the car. We must be close, that's number ninety-two... ninety-four..."

"Whoa," said Ron, stopping in his tracks.

Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop fronts around them, Fred and George's windows hit the eye like a firework display. Casual passersby were looking back over their shoulders at the windows, and a few rather stunned-looking people had actually come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window was dazzlingly full of an assortment of goods that revolved, popped, flashed, bounced, and shrieked; Harry's eyes began to water just looking at it. The right-hand window was covered with a gigantic poster, purple like those of the Ministry, but emblazoned with flashing yellow letters:

*WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT
YOU-KNOW-WHO?
YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT
U-NO-POO--
THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION
THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!*

Harry started to laugh. He heard a weak sort of moan beside him and looked around to see Mrs. Weasley gazing, dumbfounded, at the poster. Her lips moved silently, mouthing the name "U-No-Poo."

"They'll be murdered in their beds!" she whispered.

"No they won't!" said Ron, who, like Harry, was laughing. "This is brilliant!"

And he and Harry led the way into the shop. It was packed with customers; Harry could not get near the shelves. He stared around, looking up at the boxes piled to the ceiling: Here were the Skiving Snackboxes that the twins had perfected during their last, unfinished year at Hogwarts; Harry noticed that the Nosebleed Nougat was most popular, with only one battered box left on the shelf. There were bins full of trick wands, the cheapest merely turning into rubber chickens or pairs of briefs when waved, the most expensive beating the unwary user around the head and neck, and boxes of quills, which came in Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer varieties. A space cleared in the crowd, and Harry pushed his way toward the counter, where a gaggle of delighted ten-year-olds was watching a tiny little wooden man slowly ascending the steps to a real set of gallows, both perched on a box that read: *Reusable hangman - spell it or he'll swing!*

"Patented Daydream Charms"

Hermione had managed to squeeze through to a large display near the counter and was reading the information on the back of a box bearing a highly colored picture of a handsome youth and a swooning girl who were standing on the deck of a pirate ship.

"One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens. You know," said Hermione, looking up at Harry, "that really is extraordinary magic!"

"For that, Hermione," said a voice behind them, "you can have one for free."

A beaming Fred stood before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

"How are you, Harry?" They shook hands. "And what's happened to your eye, Hermione?"

Your punching telescope," she said ruefully.

"Oh blimey, I forgot about those," said Fred. "Here..."

He pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her; she unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, that bruise'll be gone within the hour," said Fred. "We had to find a decent bruise remover. We're testing most of our products on ourselves."

Hermione looked nervous. "It is safe, isn't it?" she asked.

"Course it is," said Fred bracingly. "Come on, Harry, I'll give you a tour."

Harry left Hermione dabbing her black eye with paste and followed Fred toward the back of the shop, where he saw a stand of card and rope tricks.

"Muggle magic tricks!" said Fred happily, pointing them out. "For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It's not a big earner, but we do fairly steady business, they're great novelties... Oh, here's George..."

Fred's twin shook Harry's hand energetically.

"Giving him the tour? Come through the back, Harry, that's where we're making the real money...pocket anything, you, and you'll pay in more than Galleons!" he added warningly to a small boy who hastily whipped his hand out of the tub labeled:

EDIBLE DARK MARKS----THEY'LL MAKE ANYONE SICK!

George pushed back a curtain beside the Muggle tricks and Harry saw a darker, less crowded room. The packaging on the products lining these shelves was more subdued.

"We've just developed this more serious line," said Fred. "Funny how it happened..."

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent Shield Charm," said George. "'Course, they didn't have you teaching them, Harry."

"That's right... Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves..."

"... I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes..."

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it's such a money spinner," continued George enthusiastically. "This is cool. Look, Instant Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look," said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking black horn-type objects that were indeed attempting to scurry out of sight. "You just drop one surreptitiously and it'll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diversion if you need one.

"Handy," said Harry, impressed.

"Here," said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

A young witch with short blonde hair poked her head around the curtain; Harry saw that she too was wearing magenta staff robes.

"There's a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley," she said.

Harry found it very odd to hear Fred and George called "Mr. Weasley," but they took it in their stride.

"Right you are, Verity, I'm coming," said George promptly. "Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? No charge."

"I can't do that!" said Harry, who had already pulled out his money bag to pay for the Decoy Detonators.

"You don't pay here," said Fred firmly, waving away Harry's gold.

"But..."

"You gave us our start-up loan, we haven't forgotten," said George sternly "Take whatever you like, and just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask."

George swept off through the curtain to help with the customers, and Fred led Harry back into the main part of the shop to find Hermione and Ginny still poring over the Patented Daydream Charms.

"Haven't you girls found our special WonderWitch products yet?" asked Fred. "Follow me, ladies..."

Near the window was an array of violently pink products around which a cluster of excited girls was giggling enthusiastically. Hermione and Ginny both hung back, looking wary.

"There you go," said Fred proudly. "Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Do they work?" she asked.

"Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question..."

"... and the attractiveness of the girl," said George, reappearing suddenly at their side. "But we're not selling them to our sister," he added, becoming

suddenly stern, "not when she's already got about five boys on the go from what we've..."

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a big fat lie," said Ginny calmly, leaning forward to take a small pink pot off the shelf. "What's this?"

"Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher," said Fred. "Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don't change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy called Dean Thomas?"

"Yes, I am," said Ginny. "And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?"

She was pointing at a number of round balls of fluff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a cage and emitting high-pitched squeaks.

"Pygmy Puffs," said George. "Miniature puffskeins, we can...t breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"I dumped him, he was a bad loser," said Ginny, putting a finger through the bars of the cage and watching the Pygmy Puffs crowd around it. "They're really cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," conceded Fred. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny turned to look at him, her hands on her hips. There was such a Mrs. Weasley-ish glare on her face that Harry was surprised Fred didn't recoil.

"It's none of your business. And I'll thank you" she added angrily to Ron, who had just appeared at George's elbow, laden with merchandise, "not to tell tales about me to these two!"

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut," said Fred, examining the many boxes in Ron's arms. "Cough up."

"I'm your brother!"

"And that's our stuff you're nicking. Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I'll knock off the Knut."

"But I haven't got three Galleons, nine Sickles!"

"You'd better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves."

Ron dropped several boxes, swore, and made a rude hand gesture at Fred that was unfortunately spotted by Mrs. Weasley, who had chosen that moment to appear.

"If I see you do that again I'll jinx your fingers together," she said sharply.

"Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?" said Ginny at once.

"A what?" said Mrs. Weasley warily.

"Look, they're so sweet..."

Mrs. Weasley moved aside to look at the Pygmy Puffs, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione momentarily had an unimpeded view out of the window. Draco Malfoy was hurrying up the street alone. As he passed Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, he glanced over his shoulder. Seconds later, he moved beyond the scope of the window and they lost sight of him.

"Wonder where his mummy is?" said Harry, frowning.

"Given her the slip by the looks of it," said Ron.

"Why, though?" said Hermione.

Harry said nothing; he was thinking too hard. Narcissa Malfoy would not have let her precious son out of her sight willingly; Malfoy must have made a real effort to free himself from her clutches.

Harry, knowing and loathing Malfoy, was sure the reason could not be innocent.

He glanced around. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were bending over the Pygmy Puffs. Mr. Weasley was delightedly examining a pack of Muggle marked playing cards. Fred and George were both helping customers. On the

other side of the glass, Hagrid was standing with his back to them, looking up and down the street.

"Get under here, quick," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag.

"Oh, I don't know, Harry," said Hermione, looking uncertainly toward Mrs. Weasley.

"Come on," said Ron.

She hesitated for a second longer, then ducked under the cloak with Harry and Ron. Nobody noticed them vanish; they were all too interested in Fred and George's products. Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed their way out of the door as quickly as they could, but by the time they gained the street, Malfoy had disappeared just as successfully as they had.

"He was going in that direction," murmured Harry as quietly as possible, so that the humming Hagrid would not hear them...Cmon...

They scurried along, peering left and right, through shop windows and doors, until Hermione pointed ahead.

"That's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "Turning left?"

"Big surprise," whispered Ron.

For Malfoy had glanced around, then slid into Knockturn Alley and out of sight.

"Quick, or we'll lose him," said Harry, speeding up.

"Our feet'll be seen!" said Hermione anxiously, as the cloak flapped a little around their ankles; it was much more difficult hiding all three of them under the cloak nowadays.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry impatiently. "Just hurry!"

But Knockturn Alley, the side street devoted to the Dark Arts, looked completely deserted. They peered into windows as they passed, but none of the shops seemed to have any customers at all. Harry supposed it was a bit of a giveaway in these dangerous and suspicious times to buy Dark artifacts... or at least, to be seen buying them.

Hermione gave his arm a hard pinch.

"Ouch!"

"Shh! Look! He's in there!" she breathed in Harry's ear.

They had drawn level with the only shop in Knockturn Alley that Harry had ever visited, Borgin and Burkes, which sold a wide variety of sinister objects. There in the midst of the cases full of skulls and old bottles stood Draco Malfoy with his back to them, just visible beyond the very same large

black cabinet in which Harry had once hidden to avoid Malfoy and his father. Judging by the movements of Malfoy's hands, he was talking animatedly. The proprietor of the shop, Mr. Borgin, an oily-haired, stooping man, stood facing Malfoy. He was wearing a curious expression of mingled resentment and fear.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" said Hermione.

"We can!" said Ron excitedly. "Hang on, damn."

He dropped a couple more of the boxes he was still clutching as he fumbled with the largest.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Fantastic!" said Hermione, as Ron unraveled the long, flesh-colored strings and began to feed them toward the bottom of the door. "Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable..."

"No!" said Ron gleefully. "Listen!"

They put their heads together and listened intently to the ends of the strings, through which Malfoy's voice could be heard loud and clear, as though a radio had been turned on.

"... you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," said Borgin, in a tone that suggested he was unwilling to commit himself. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't," said Malfoy. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Harry saw Borgin lick his lips nervously.

"Well, without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn't guarantee anything."

"No?" said Malfoy, and Harry knew, just by his tone, that Malfoy was sneering. "Perhaps this will make you more confident."

He moved toward Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shuffled sideways to try and keep him in sight, but all they could see was Borgin, looking very frightened.

"Tell anyone," said Malfoy, "and there will be retribution. You know Fenrir Greyback? He's a family friend. He'll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you're giving the problem your full attention."

"There will be no need for..."

"I'll decide that," said Malfoy. "Well, I'd better be off. And don't forget to keep that one safe, I'll need it."

"Perhaps you'd like to take it now?"

"No, of course I wouldn't, you stupid, little man, how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don't sell it."

"Of course not... sir."

Borgin made a bow as deep as the one Harry had once seen him give Lucius Malfoy.

"Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?"

"Naturally, naturally," murmured Borgin, bowing again.

Next moment, the bell over the door tinkled loudly as Malfoy stalked out of the shop looking very pleased with himself. He passed so close to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that they felt the cloak flutter around their knees again. Inside the shop, Borgin remained frozen; his unctuous smile had vanished; he looked worried.

"What was that about?" whispered Ron, reeling in the Extendable Ears.

"Dunno," said Harry, thinking hard. "He wants something mended... and he wants to reserve something in there... Could you see what he pointed at when he said 'that one'?"

"No, he was behind that cabinet..."

"You two stay here," whispered Hermione.

"What are you... ?"

But Hermione had already ducked out from under the cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then marched into the shop, setting the bell tinkling again. Ron hastily fed the Extendable Ears back under the door and passed one of the strings to Harry.

"Hello, horrible morning, isn't it?" Hermione said brightly to Borgin, who did not answer, but cast her a suspicious look. Humming cheerily, Hermione strolled through the jumble of objects on display.

"Is this necklace for sale?" she asked, pausing beside a glass-fronted case.

"If you've got one and a half thousand Galleons," said Mr. Borgin coldly.

"Oh... er... no, I haven't got quite that much," said Hermione, walking on.
"And... what about this lovely... um... skull?"

"Sixteen Galleons."

"So it's for sale, then? It isn't being... kept for anyone?"

Mr. Borgin squinted at her. Harry had the nasty feeling he knew exactly what Hermione was up to. Apparently Hermione felt she had been rumbled too because she suddenly threw caution to the winds.

"The thing is, that... er... boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he's a friend of mine, and I want to get him a birthday present, but if he's already reserved anything, I obviously don't want to get him the same thing, so... um..."

It was a pretty lame story in Harry's opinion, and apparently Borgin thought so too.

"Out," he said sharply. "Get out!"

Hermione did not wait to be asked twice, but hurried to the door with Borgin at her heels. As the bell tinkled again, Borgin slammed the door behind her and put up the closed sign.

"Ah well," said Ron, throwing the cloak back over Hermione. "Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious..."

"Well, next time you can show me how it's done, Master of Mystery!" she snapped.

Ron and Hermione bickered all the way back to Weasleys'

Wizard Wheezes, where they were forced to stop so that they could dodge undetected around a very anxious-looking Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid, who had clearly noticed their absence. Once in the shop, Harry whipped off the Invisibility Cloak, hid it in his bag, and joined in with the other two when they insisted, in answer to Mrs. Weasleys accusations, that they had been in the back room all along, and that she could not have looked properly.

Chapter 7: The Slug Club

Harry spent a lot of the last week of the holidays pondering the meaning of Malfoy's behavior in Knockturn Alley. What disturbed him most was the satisfied look on Malfoy's face as he had left the shop. Nothing that made Malfoy look that happy could be good news. To his slight annoyance, however, neither Ron nor Hermione seemed quite as curious about Malfoy's activities as he was; or at least, they seemed to get bored of discussing it after a few days.

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," said Hermione a little impatiently. She was sitting on the windowsill in Fred and George's room with her feet up on one of the cardboard boxes and had only grudgingly looked up from her new copy of *Advanced Rune Translation*. "But haven't we agreed there could be a lot of explanations?"

"Maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory" said Ron vaguely, as he attempted to straighten his broomstick's bent tail twigs. "Remember that shriveled-up arm Malfoy had?"

"But what about when he said, 'Don't forget to keep that one safe'?" asked Harry for the umpteenth time. "That sounded to me like Borgin's got another one of the broken objects, and Malfoy wants both."

"You reckon?" said Ron, now trying to scrape some dirt off his broom handle.

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. When neither Ron nor Hermione answered, he said, "Malfoy's father's in Azkaban. Don't you think Malfoy'd like revenge?"

Ron looked up, blinking.

"Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?"

"That's my point, I don't know!" said Harry, frustrated. "But he's up to something and I think we should take it seriously. His father's a Death Eater and ..."

Harry broke off, his eyes fixed on the window behind Hermione, his mouth open. A startling thought had just occurred to him.

"Harry?" said Hermione in an anxious voice. "What's wrong?"

"Your scar's not hurting again, is it?" asked Ron nervously.

"He's a Death Eater," said Harry slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater!"

There was a silence; then Ron erupted in laughter. "Malfoy? He's sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join?"

"It seems very unlikely, Harry," said Hermione in a repressive sort of voice. "What makes you think ... ?"

"In Madam Malkin's. She didn't touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up his sleeve. It was his left arm. He's been branded with the Dark Mark."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

"Well..." said Ron, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

"I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry," said Hermione.

"He showed Borgin something we couldn't see," Harry pressed on stubbornly. "Something that seriously scared Borgin. It was the Mark, I know it... he was showing Borgin who he was dealing with, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!"

Ron and Hermione exchanged another look.

"I'm not sure, Harry..."

"Yeah, I still don't reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join..."

Annoyed, but absolutely convinced he was right, Harry snatched up a pile of filthy Quidditch robes and left the room; Mrs. Weasley had been urging them for days not to leave their washing and packing until the last moment. On the landing he bumped into Ginny, who was returning to her room carrying a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

"I wouldn't go in the kitchen just now," she warned him. "There's a lot of Phlegm around."

"I'll be careful not to slip in it." Harry smiled.

Sure enough, when he entered the kitchen it was to find Fleur sitting at the kitchen table, in full flow about plans for her wedding to Bill, while Mrs. Weasley kept watch over a pile of self-peeling sprouts, looking bad-tempered.

"... Bill and I 'ave almost decided on only two bridesmaids, Ginny and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzer. I am theenking of dressing zem in pale gold, pink would of course be 'orrible with Ginny's 'air!"

"Ah, Harry!" said Mrs. Weasley loudly, cutting across Fleur's monologue. "Good, I wanted to explain about the security arrangements for the journey to Hogwarts tomorrow. We've got Ministry cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting at the station."

"Is Tonks going to be there?" asked Harry, handing over his Quidditch things.

"No, I don't think so, she's been stationed somewhere else from what Arthur said."

"She has let 'erself go, zat Tonks," Fleur mused, examining her own stunning reflection in the back of a teaspoon. "A big mistake if you ask."

"Yes, thank you," said Mrs. Weasley tartly, cutting across Fleur again. "You'd better get on, Harry, I want the trunks ready tonight, if possible, so we don't have the usual last-minute scramble."

And in fact, their departure the following morning was smoother than usual. The Ministry cars glided up to the front of the Burrow to find them waiting, trunks packed; Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, safely enclosed in his traveling basket; and Hedwig; Ron's owl, Pig-widgeon; and Ginny's new purple Pygmy Puff, Arnold, in cages.

"Au revoir, 'Any," said Fleur throatily, kissing him good-bye. Ron hurried forward, looking hopeful, but Ginny stuck out her foot and Ron fell, sprawling in the dust at Fleur's feet. Furious, red-faced, and dirt-spattered, he hurried into the car without saying good-bye.

There was no cheerful Hagrid waiting for them at King's Cross Station. Instead, two grim-faced, bearded Aurors in dark Muggle suits moved forward the moment the cars stopped and, flanking the party, marched them into the station without speaking.

"Quick, quick, through the barrier," said Mrs. Weasley, who seemed a little flustered by this austere efficiency. "Harry had better go first, with..."

She looked inquiringly at one of the Aurors, who nodded briefly, seized Harry's upper arm, and attempted to steer him toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

"I can walk, thanks," said Harry irritably, jerking his arm out of the Auror's grip. He pushed his trolley directly at the solid barrier, ignoring his silent companion, and found himself, a second later, standing on platform nine and three-quarters, where the scarlet Hogwarts Express stood belching steam over the crowd.

Hermione and the Weasleys joined him within seconds. Without waiting to consult his grim-faced Auror, Harry motioned to Ron and Hermione to follow him up the platform, looking for an empty compartment.

"We can't, Harry," said Hermione, looking apologetic. "Ron and I've got to go to the prefects' carriage first and then patrol the corridors for a bit."

"Oh yeah, I forgot," said Harry.

"You'd better get straight on the train, all of you, you've only got a few minutes to go," said Mrs. Weasley, consulting her watch. "Well, have a lovely term, Ron..."

"Mr. Weasley, can I have a quick word?" said Harry, making up his mind on the spur of the moment.

"Of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked slightly surprised, but followed Harry out of earshot of the others nevertheless.

Harry had thought it through carefully and come to the conclusion that, if he was to tell anyone, Mr. Weasley was the right person; firstly, because he worked at the Ministry and was therefore in the best position to make further investigations, and secondly,

because he thought that there was not too much risk of Mr. Weasley exploding with anger.

He could see Mrs. Weasley and the grim-faced Auror casting the pair of them suspicious looks as they moved away.

"When we were in Diagon Alley," Harry began, but Mr. Weasley forestalled him with a grimace.

"Am I about to discover where you, Ron, and Hermione disappeared to while you were supposed to be in the back room of Fred and George's shop?"

"How did you...?"

"Harry, please. You're talking to the man who raised Fred and George."

"Er... yeah, all right, we weren't in the back room." "Very well, then, let's hear the worst."

"Well, we followed Draco Malfoy. We used my Invisibility Cloak."

"Did you have any particular reason for doing so, or was it a mere whim?"

"Because I thought Malfoy was up to something," said Harry, disregarding Mr. Weasley's look of mingled exasperation and amusement. "He'd given his mother the slip and I wanted to know why."

"Of course you did," said Mr. Weasley, sounding resigned. "Well? Did you find out why?"

"He went into Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, "and started bullying the bloke in there, Borgin, to help him fix something. And he said he wanted Borgin to keep something else for him. He made it sound like it was the same kind of thing that needed fixing. Like they were a pair. And..."

Harry took a deep breath.

"There's something else. We saw Malfoy jump about a mile when Madam Malkin tried to touch his left arm. I think he's been branded with the Dark Mark. I think he's replaced his father as a Death Eater."

Mr. Weasley looked taken aback. After a moment he said, "Harry, I doubt whether You-Know-Who would allow a sixteen-year-old..."

"Does anyone really know what You-Know-Who would or wouldn't do?" asked Harry angrily. "Mr. Weasley, I'm sorry, but isn't it worth investigating? If Malfoy wants something fixing, and he needs to threaten Borgin to get it done, it's probably something Dark or dangerous, isn't it?"

"I doubt it, to be honest, Harry," said Mr. Weasley slowly. "You see, when Lucius Malfoy was arrested, we raided his house. We took away everything that might have been dangerous." "I think you missed something," said Harry stubbornly. "Well, maybe," said Mr. Weasley, but Harry could tell that Mr. Weasley was humoring him.

There was a whistle behind them; nearly everyone had boarded the train and the doors were closing.

"You'd better hurry!" said Mr. Weasley, as Mrs. Weasley cried, "Harry, quickly!"

He hurried forward and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley helped him load his trunk onto the train.

"Now, dear, you're coming to us for Christmas, it's all fixed with Dumbledore, so we'll see you quite soon," said Mrs. Weasley through the window, as Harry slammed the door shut behind him and the train began to move. "You make sure you look after yourself and..."

The train was gathering speed.

"...be good and..." , She was jogging to keep up now.

"...stay safe!"

Harry waved until the train had turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view, then turned to see where the others had got to. He supposed Ron and Hermione were cloistered in the prefects' carriage, but Ginny was a little way along the corridor, chatting to some friends. He made his way toward her, dragging his trunk.

People stared shamelessly as he approached. They even pressed their faces against the windows of their compartments to get a look at him. He had expected an upswing in the amount of gaping and gawping he would have to endure this term after all the "Chosen One" rumors in the Daily Prophet, but he did not enjoy the sensation of standing in a very bright spotlight. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder.

"Fancy trying to find a compartment?"

"I can't, Harry, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny brightly. "See you later."

"Right," said Harry. He felt a strange twinge of annoyance as she walked away, her long red hair dancing behind her; he had become so used to her presence over the summer that he had almost forgotten that Ginny did not hang around with him, Ron, and Hermione while at school. Then he blinked and looked around: He was surrounded by mesmerized girls.

"Hi, Harry!" said a familiar voice from behind him.

"Neville!" said Harry in relief, turning to see a round-faced boy struggling toward him.

"Hello, Harry," said a girl with long hair and large misty eyes, who was just behind Neville.

"Luna, hi, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you," said Luna. She was clutching a magazine to her chest; large letters on the front announced that there was a pair of free Spectrespecs inside.

"Quibbler still going strong, then?" asked Harry, who felt a certain fondness for the magazine, having given it an exclusive interview the previous year.

"Oh yes, circulation's well up," said Luna happily.

"Let's find seats," said Harry, and the three of them set off along the train through hordes of silently staring students. At last they found an empty compartment, and Harry hurried inside gratefully.

"They're even staring at us?" said Neville, indicating himself and Luna.
"Because we're with you!"

"They're staring at you because you were at the Ministry too," said Harry, as he hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack. "Our little adventure there was all over the Daily Prophet, you must've

seen it."

"Yes, I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity," said Neville, "but she was really pleased. Says I'm starting to live up to my dad at long last. She bought me a new wand, look!"

He pulled it out and showed it to Harry.

"Cherry and unicorn hair," he said proudly. "We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day ... oi, come back here, Trevor!"

And he dived under the seat to retrieve his toad as it made one of its frequent bids for freedom.

"Are we still doing D.A. meetings this year, Harry?" asked Luna,

who was detaching a pair of psychedelic spectacles from the middle of The Quibbler.

"No point now we've got rid of Umbridge, is there?" said Harry, sitting down. Neville bumped his head against the seat as he emerged from under it. He looked most disappointed.

"I liked the D.A.! I learned loads with you!"

"I enjoyed the meetings too," said Luna serenely. "It was like having friends."

This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna often said and which made Harry feel a squirming mixture of pity and embarrassment. Before he could respond, however, there was a disturbance outside their compartment door; a group of fourth-year girls was whispering and giggling together on the other side of the glass.

"You ask him!"

No, you!

"I'll do it!"

And one of them, a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair pushed her way through the door.

"Hi, Harry, I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane," she said loudly and confidently. "Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't have to sit with them," she added in a stage whisper, indicating Neville's bottom, which was sticking out from under the seat again as he groped around for Trevor, and Luna, who was now wearing her free Spectrespecs, which gave her the look of a demented, multicolored owl.

"They're friends of mine," said Harry coldly.

"Oh," said the girl, looking very surprised. "Oh. Okay."

And she withdrew, sliding the door closed behind her.

"People expect you to have cooler friends than us," said Luna, once again displaying her knack for embarrassing honesty.

"You are cool," said Harry shortly. "None of them was at the Ministry. They didn't fight with me."

"That's a very nice thing to say," beamed Luna. Then she pushed her Spectrespecs farther up her nose and settled down to read *The*

Quibbler.

"We didn't face him, though," said Neville, emerging from under the seat with fluff and dust in his hair and a resigned-looking Trevor in his hand. "You did. You should hear my gran talk about you. 'That Harry Potter's got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!' She'd give anything to have you as a grand-son..."

Harry laughed uncomfortably and changed the subject to OWL results as soon as he could. While Neville recited his grades and wondered aloud

whether he would be allowed to take a Transfiguration NEWT, with only an "Acceptable," Harry watched him without really listening.

Neville's childhood had been blighted by Voldemort just as much as Harry's had, but Neville had no idea how close he had come to having Harry's destiny. The prophecy could have referred to either of them, yet, for his own inscrutable reasons, Voldemort had chosen to believe that Harry was the one meant.

Had Voldemort chosen Neville, it would be Neville sitting opposite Harry bearing the lightning-shaped scar and the weight of the prophecy... Or would it? Would Neville's mother have died to save him, as Lily had died for Harry? Surely she would... But what if she had been unable to stand between her son and Voldemort? Would there then have been no "Chosen One" at all? An empty seat where Neville now sat and a scarless Harry who would have been kissed good-bye by his own mother, not Ron's?

"You all right, Harry? You look funny," said Neville.

Harry started. "Sorry ... I ..."

"Wrackspurt got you?" asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous colored spectacles.

"I... what?"

"A Wrackspurt... They're invisible. They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy," she said. "I thought I felt one zooming around in here."

She flapped her hands at thin air, as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other's eyes and hastily began to talk of Quidditch.

The weather beyond the train windows was as patchy as it had been all summer; they passed through stretches of the chilling mist, then out into weak, clear sunlight. It was during one of the clear spells, when the sun was visible almost directly overhead, that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment at last.

"Wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I'm starving," said Ron longingly, slumping into the seat beside Harry and rubbing his stomach. "Hi, Neville. Hi, Luna. Guess what?" he added, turning to Harry. "Malfoy's not doing prefect duty. He's just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed."

Harry sat up straight, interested. It was not like Malfoy to pass up the chance to demonstrate his power as prefect, which he had happily abused all the previous year.

"What did he do when he saw you?"

"The usual," said Ron indifferently, demonstrating a rude hand

gesture. "Not like him, though, is it? Well... that is" -- he did the hand gesture again -- "but why isn't he out there bullying first years?"

"Dunno," said Harry, but his mind was racing. Didn't this look as though Malfoy had more important things on his mind than bullying younger students?

"Maybe he preferred the Inquisitorial Squad," said Hermione. "Maybe being a prefect seems a bit tame after that."

"I don't think so," said Harry. "I think he's ..."

But before he could expound on his theory, the compartment door slid open again and a breathless third-year girl stepped inside.

"I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter," she faltered, as her eyes met Harry's and she turned scarlet. She was holding out two scrolls of parchment tied with violet ribbon. Perplexed, Harry and Neville took the scroll addressed to each of them and the girl stumbled back out of the compartment.

"What is it?" Ron demanded, as Harry unrolled his.

"An invitation," said Harry.

Harry,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely, Horace

"But what does he want me for?" asked Neville nervously, as though he was expecting detention.

"No idea," said Harry, which was not entirely true, though he had no proof yet that his hunch was correct. "Listen," he added, seized by a sudden brain wave, "let's go under the Invisibility Cloak, then we might get a good look at Malfoy on the way, see what he's up to."

This idea, however, came to nothing: The corridors, which were packed with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley, were impossible to negotiate while wearing the cloak. Harry stowed it regretfully back in his bag, reflecting that it would have been nice to wear it just to avoid all the staring, which seemed to have increased in intensity even since he had last walked down the train. Every now and then, students would hurtle out of their compartments to get a better look at him. The exception was Cho Chang, who darted into her compartment when she saw Harry coming. As Harry passed the window, he saw her deep in determined conversation with her friend Marietta, who was wearing a very thick layer of makeup that did not entirely obscure the odd formation of pimples still etched across her face. Smirking slightly, Harry pushed on.

When they reached compartment C, they saw at once that they were not Slughorn's only invitees, although judging by the enthusiasm of Slughorn's welcome, Harry was the most warmly anticipated.

"Harry, m'boy!" said Slughorn, jumping up at the sight of him so that his great velvet-covered belly seemed to fill all the remaining space in the compartment. His shiny bald head and great silvery mustache gleamed as brightly in the sunlight as the golden

buttons on his waistcoat. "Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!"

Neville nodded, looking scared. At a gesture from Slughorn, they sat down opposite each other in the only two empty seats, which were nearest the door. Harry glanced around at their fellow guests. He recognized a Slytherin from their year, a tall black boy with high cheekbones and long, slanting eyes; there were also two seventh-year boys Harry did not know and, squashed in the corner beside Slughorn and looking as though she was not entirely sure how she had got there, Ginny.

"Now, do you know everyone?" Slughorn asked Harry and Neville. "Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course --"

Zabini did not make any sign of recognition or greeting, nor did Harry or Neville: Gryffindor and Slytherin students loathed each other on principle.

"This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you've come across each other ... ?
No?"

McLaggen, a large, wiry-haired youth, raised a hand, and Harry and Neville nodded back at him.

"... and this is Marcus Belby, I don't know whether ...?"

Belby, who was thin and nervous-looking, gave a strained smile.

"... and this charming young lady tells me she knows you!" Slughorn finished.

Ginny grimaced at Harry and Neville from behind Slughorn's back.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," said Slughorn cozily. "A chance to get to know you all a little better. Here, take a napkin. I've packed my own lunch; the trolley, as I remember it, is heavy on

licorice wands, and a poor old man's digestive system isn't quite up to such things... Pheasant, Belby?"

Belby started and accepted what looked like half a cold pheasant.

"I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles," Slughorn told Harry and Neville, now passing around

a basket of rolls. "Outstanding wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?"

Unfortunately, Beiby had just taken a large mouthful of pheasant; in his haste to answer Slughorn he swallowed too fast, turned purple, and began to choke.

"Anapneo," said Slughorn calmly, pointing his wand at Belby, whose airway seemed to clear at once.

"Not... not much of him, no," gasped Belby, his eyes streaming.

"Well, of course, I daresay he's busy," said Slughorn, looking questioningly at Belby. "I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion without considerable hard work!"

"I suppose..." said Belby, who seemed afraid to take another bite of pheasant until he was sure that Slughorn had finished with him. "Er... he and my dad don't get on very well, you see, so I don't really know much about..."

His voice tailed away as Slughorn gave him a cold smile and turned to McLaggen instead.

"Now, you, Cormac," said Slughorn, "I happen to know you see a lot of your Uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather splendid picture of the two of you hunting nogtails in, I think, Norfolk?"

"Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was," said McLaggen. "We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour; this was before he became Minister, obviously ..."

"Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus too?" beamed Slughorn, now offering around a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was missed out. "Now tell me..."

It was as Harry had suspected. Everyone here seemed to have been invited because they were connected to somebody well-known or influential... everyone except Ginny. Zabini, who was interrogated after McLaggen, turned out to have a famously beautiful witch for a mother (from what Harry could make out, she had been married seven times, each of her husbands dying mysteriously and leaving her mounds of gold). It was Neville's turn next: This was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, for Neville's parents, well-known Aurors, had been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange and a couple of Death Eater cronies. At the end of Neville's interview, Harry had the impression that Slughorn was reserving judgment on Neville, yet to see whether he had any of his parents' flair.

"And now," said Slughorn, shifting massively in his seat with the air of a compere introducing his star act. "Harry Potter! Where to begin? I feel I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!" He contemplated Harry for a moment as though he was a particularly large and succulent piece of pheasant, then said, "'The Chosen One,' they're calling you now!"

Harry said nothing. Belby, McLaggen, and Zabini were all staring at him.

"Of course," said Slughorn, watching Harry closely, "there have been rumors for years... I remember when ... well ... after that terrible night ... Lily ... James ... and you survived ... and the word was that you must have powers beyond the ordinary ..."

Zabini gave a tiny little cough that was clearly supposed to

indicate amused skepticism. An angry voice burst out from behind Slughorn.

"Yeah, Zabini, because you're so talented... at posing..."

"Oh dear!" chuckled Slughorn comfortably, looking around at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini around Slughorn's great belly. "You want to be careful, Blaise! I saw this young lady perform the most marvelous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn't cross her!"

Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

"Anyway," said Slughorn, turning back to Harry. "Such rumors this summer. Of course, one doesn't know what to believe, the Prophet has been known to print inaccuracies, make mistakes ... but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry and that you were there in the thick of it all!"

Harry, who could not see any way out of this without flatly lying, nodded but still said nothing. Slughorn beamed at him.

"So modest, so modest, no wonder Dumbledore is so fond ... you were there, then? But the rest of the stories ... so sensational, of course, one doesn't know quite what to believe ... this fabled prophecy, for instance ..."

"We never heard a prophecy," said Neville, turning geranium pink as he said it.

"That's right," said Ginny staunchly. "Neville and I were both there too, and all this 'Chosen One' rubbish is just the Prophet making things up as usual."

"You were both there too, were you?" said Slughorn with great interest, looking from Ginny to Neville, but both of them sat clam-like before his encouraging smile.

"Yes... well... it is true that the Prophet often exaggerates, of course..." Slughorn said, sounding a little disappointed. "I remember dear Gwenog telling me (Gwenog Jones, I mean, of course, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies) ..."

He meandered off into a long-winded reminiscence, but Harry had the distinct impression that Slughorn had not finished with him, and that he had not been convinced by Neville and Ginny.

The afternoon wore on with more anecdotes about illustrious wizards Slughorn had taught, all of whom had been delighted to join what he called the "Slug Club" at Hogwarts. Harry could not wait to leave, but couldn't see how to do so politely. Finally the train emerged from yet another long misty stretch into a red sunset, and Slughorn looked around, blinking in the twilight.

"Good gracious, it's getting dark already! I didn't notice that they'd lit the lamps! You'd better go and change into your robes, all of you. McLaggen, you must drop by and borrow that book on nogtails. Harry, Blaise ... any time you're passing. Same goes for you, miss," he twinkled at Ginny. "Well, off you go, off you go!"

As he pushed past Harry into the darkening corridor, Zabini shot him a filthy look that Harry returned with interest. He, Ginny, and Neville followed Zabini back along the train.

"I'm glad that's over," muttered Neville. "Strange man, isn't he?" "Yeah, he is a bit," said Harry, his eyes on Zabini. "How come you ended up in there, Ginny?"

"He saw me hex Zacharias Smith," said Ginny. "You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the D.A.? He kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry and in the end he annoyed me so much I hexed him ... when Slughorn came in I thought I was going to get detention, but he just thought it was a really good hex and invited me to lunch! Mad, eh?"

"Better reason for inviting someone than because their mother's famous," said Harry, scowling at the back of Zabini's head, "or because their uncle..."

But he broke off. An idea had just occurred to him, a reckless but potentially wonderful idea... In a minute's time, Zabini was going to reenter the Slytherin sixth-year compartment and Malfoy would be sitting there, thinking himself unheard by anybody except fellow Slytherins... If Harry could only enter, unseen, behind him, what might he not see or hear? True, there was little of the journey left ... Hogsmeade Station had to be less than half an hour away, judging by the wildness of the scenery flashing by the windows ... but nobody else seemed prepared to take Harry's suspicions seriously, so it was down to him to prove them.

"I'll see you two later," said Harry under his breath, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak and flinging it over himself.

"But what're you ... ?" asked Neville.

"Later!" whispered Harry, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made such caution almost pointless.

The corridors were almost completely empty now. Nearly everyone had returned to their carriages to change into their school robes and pack up their possessions. Though he was as close as he could get to Zabini without touching him, Harry was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Zabini opened the door. Zabini was already sliding it shut when Harry hastily stuck out his foot to prevent it closing.

"What's wrong with this thing?" said Zabini angrily as he smashed the sliding door repeatedly into Harry's foot.

Harry seized the door and pushed it open, hard; Zabini, still clinging on to the handle, toppled over sideways into Gregory Goyle's lap, and in the ensuing ruckus, Harry darted into the compartment, leapt onto Zabini's temporarily empty seat, and hoisted himself up into the luggage rack. It was fortunate that Goyle and Zabini were snarling at each other, drawing all eyes onto them, for Harry was quite sure his feet and ankles had been revealed as the cloak had flapped around them; indeed, for one horrible moment he thought he saw Malfoy's eyes follow his trainer as it whipped upward out of sight. But then Goyle slammed the door shut and flung Zabini off him; Zabini collapsed into his own seat looking ruffled, Vincent Crabbe returned to his comic, and Malfoy, sniggering, lay back down across two seats with his head in Pansy Parkinsons lap. Harry lay curled uncomfortably under the cloak to ensure that every inch of him remained hidden, and watched Pansy stroke the sleek blond hair off Malfoy's forehead, smirking as she did so, as though anyone would have loved to have been in her place. The lanterns swinging from the carriage ceiling cast a bright light over the scene: Harry could read every word of Crabbe's comic directly

below him.

"So, Zabini," said Malfoy, "what did Slughorn want?"

"Just trying to make up to well-connected people," said Zabini,

who was still glowering at Goyle. "Not that he managed to find many."

This information did not seem to please Malfoy. "Who else had he invited?" he demanded.

"McLaggen from Gryffindor," said Zabini.

"Oh yeah, his uncle's big in the Ministry," said Malfoy.

"... someone else called Belby, from Ravenclaw ..."

"Not him, he's a prat!" said Pansy.

"... and Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl," finished Zabini.

Malfoy sat up very suddenly, knocking Pansy's hand aside.

"He invited Longbottom?."

"Well, I assume so, as Longbottom was there," said Zabini indifferently.

"What's Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?"

Zabini shrugged.

"Potter, precious Potter, obviously he wanted a look at 'the Chosen One,'" sneered Malfoy, "but that Weasley girl! What's so special about her?"

"A lot of boys like her," said Pansy, watching Malfoy out of the corner of her eyes for his reaction. "Even you think she's good-looking, don't you, Blaise, and we all know how hard you are to please!"

"I wouldn't touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she looked like," said Zabini coldly, and Pansy looked pleased. Malfoy sank back across her lap and allowed her to resume the stroking of his hair.

"Well, I pity Slughorn's taste. Maybe he's going a bit senile. Shame, my father always said he was a good wizard in his day. My father used to be a bit of a favorite of his. Slughorn probably hasn't heard I'm on the train, or..."

"I wouldn't bank on an invitation," said Zabini. "He asked me about Notts father when I first arrived. They used to be old

friends, apparently, but when he heard he'd been caught at the Ministry he didn't look happy, and Nott didn't get an invitation, did he? I don't think Slughorn's interested in Death Eaters."

Malfoy looked angry, but forced out a singularly humorless laugh.

"Well, who cares what he's interested in? What is he, when you come down to it? Just some stupid teacher." Malfoy yawned ostentatiously. "I

mean, I might not even be at Hogwarts next year, what's it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?"

"What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?" said Pansy indignantly, ceasing grooming Malfoy at once.

"Well, you never know," said Malfoy with the ghost of a smirk. "I might have ... er ... moved on to bigger and better things."

Crouched in the luggage rack under his cloak, Harry's heart began to race. What would Ron and Hermione say about this? Crabbe and Goyle were gawping at Malfoy; apparently they had had no inkling of any plans to move on to bigger and better things. Even Zabini had allowed a look of curiosity to mar his haughty features. Pansy resumed the slow stroking of Malfoy's hair, looking dumbfounded.

"Do you mean..."

Malfoy shrugged.

"Mother wants me to complete my education, but personally, I don't see it as that important these days. I mean, think about it... When the Dark Lord takes over, is he going to care how many OWLs or N.E.W.T.S anyone's got? Of course he isn't. It'll be all about the kind of service he received, the level of devotion he was shown."

"And you think you'll be able to do something for him?" asked

Zabini scathingly. "Sixteen years old and not even fully qualified yet?"

"I've just said, haven't I? Maybe he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that you need to be qualified for," said Malfoy quietly.

Crabbe and Goyle were both sitting with their mouths open like gargoyles. Pansy was gazing down at Malfoy as though she had never seen anything so awe-inspiring.

"I can see Hogwarts," said Malfoy, clearly relishing the effect he had created as he pointed out of the blackened window. "We'd better get our robes on."

Harry was so busy staring at Malfoy, he did not notice Goyle reaching up for his trunk; as he swung it down, it hit Harry hard on the side of the head. He let out an involuntary gasp of pain, and Malfoy looked up at the luggage rack, frowning.

Harry was not afraid of Malfoy, but he still did not much like the idea of being discovered hiding under his Invisibility Cloak by a group of unfriendly Slytherins. Eyes still watering and head still throbbing, he drew his wand, careful not to disarrange the cloak, and waited, breath held. To his relief, Malfoy seemed to decide that he had imagined the noise; he pulled on his robes like the others, locked his trunk, and as the train slowed to a jerky crawl, fastened a thick new traveling cloak round his neck.

Harry could see the corridors filling up again and hoped that Hermione and Ron would take his things out onto the platform for him; he was stuck where he was until the compartment had quite emptied. At last, with a final lurch, the train came to a complete halt. Goyle threw the door open and muscled his way out

into a crowd of second years, punching them aside; Crabbe and Zabini followed.

"You go on," Malfoy told Pansy, who was waiting for him with her hand held out as though hoping he would hold it. "I just want to check something."

Pansy left. Now Harry and Malfoy were alone in the compartment. People were filing past, descending onto the dark platform. Malfoy moved over to the compartment door and let down the blinds, so that people in the corridor beyond could not peer in. He then bent down over his trunk and opened it again.

Harry peered down over the edge of the luggage rack, his heart pumping a little faster. What had Malfoy wanted to hide from Pansy? Was he about to see the mysterious broken object it was so important to mend?

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow motion, he toppled out of the luggage rack and fell, with an agonizing, floor-shaking crash, at Malfoy's feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled absurdly into the cramped kneeling position. He couldn't move a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

"I thought so," he said jubilantly. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the air after Zabini came back..."

His eyes lingered for a moment upon Harry's trainers.

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here..."

And he stamped, hard, on Harry's face. Harry felt his nose break; blood spurted everywhere.

"That's from my father. Now, let's see..."

Malfoy dragged the cloak out from under Harry's immobilized body and threw it over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you till the trains back in London," he said quietly. "See you around, Potter... or not."

And taking care to tread on Harry's fingers, Malfoy left the compartment.

Chapter 8 -- Victorious Snape

Harry could not move a muscle. He lay there beneath the Invisibility Cloak feeling the blood from his nose flow, hot and wet, over his face, listening to the voices and footsteps in the corridor beyond. His immediate thought was that someone would, surely check the compartments before the train departed again. But at once came the dispiriting realization that even if somebody looked into the compartment, he would be neither seen nor heard. His best hope was that somebody else would walk in and step on him.

Harry had never hated Malfoy more than as he lay there, like an absurd turtle on its back, blood dripping sickeningly into his open mouth. What a stupid situation to have landed himself in... and now the last few footsteps were dying away; everyone was shuffling along the dark platform outside; he could hear the scraping of trunks and loud babble of talk.

Ron and Hermione would think that he had left the train without them. Once they arrived at Hogwarts and took their places in the Great Hall, looked up and down the Gryffindor table a few times, and finally realized that he was not there, he, no doubt, would be halfway back to London.

He tried to make a sound, even a grunt, but it was impossible. Then he remembered that some wizards, like Dumbledore, could perform spells without speaking, so he tried to summon his wand, which had fallen out of his hand, by saying the words "Accio Wand!" over and over again in his head, but nothing happened.

He thought he could hear the rustling of the trees that surrounded the lake, and the far-off hoot of an owl, but no hint of a search being made or even (he despised himself slightly for hoping it) panicked voices wondering where Harry Potter had gone. A feeling of hopelessness spread through him as he imagined the convoy of thestral-drawn carriages trundling up to the

school and the muffled yells of laughter issuing from whichever carriage Malfoy was riding in, where he could be recounting his attack on Harry to Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, and Pansy Parkinson.

The train lurched, causing Harry to roll over onto his side. Now he was staring at the dusty underside of the seats instead of the ceiling. The floor began to vibrate as the engine roared into life. The Express was leaving and nobody knew he was still on it...

Then he felt his Invisibility Cloak fly off him and a voice overhead said, "Wotcher, Harry."

There was a flash of red light and Harry's body unfroze; he was able to push himself into a more dignified sitting position, hastily wipe the blood off his bruised face with the back of his hand, and raise his head to look up at Tonks, who was holding the Invisibility Cloak she had just pulled away.

"We'd better get out of here, quickly," she said, as the train windows became obscured with steam and they began to move out of the station. "Come on, we'll jump."

Harry hurried after her into the corridor. She pulled open the train door and leapt onto the platform, which seemed to be sliding underneath them as the train gathered momentum. He followed her, staggered a little on landing, then straightened up in time to see the gleaming scarlet steam engine pick up speed, round the corner, and disappear from view.

The cold night air was soothing on his throbbing nose. Tonks was looking at him; he felt angry and embarrassed that he had been discovered in such a ridiculous position. Silently she handed him back the Invisibility Cloak.

"Who did it?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Harry bitterly. "Thanks for... well..."

"No problem," said Tonks, without smiling. From what Harry could see in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and miserable-looking as she had been when he had met her at the Burrow. "I can fix your nose if you stand still."

Harry did not think much of this idea; he had been intending to visit Madam Pomfrey, the matron, in whom he had a little more confidence when it came to Healing Spells, but it seemed rude to say this, so he stayed stock-still and closed his eyes,

"Episkey" said Tonks.

Harry's nose felt very hot, and then very cold. He raised a hand and felt gingerly. It seemed to be mended.

"Thanks a lot!"

"You'd better put that cloak back on, and we can walk up to the school," said Tonks, still unsmiling. As Harry swung the cloak back over himself, she waved her wand; an immense silvery four-legged creature erupted from it and streaked off into the darkness.

"Was that a Patronus?" asked Harry, who had seen Dumbledore send messages like this.

"Yes, I'm sending word to the castle that I've got you or they'll worry. Come on, we'd better not dawdle."

They set off toward the lane that led to the school.

"How did you find me?"

"I noticed you hadn't left the train and I knew you had that cloak. I thought you might be hiding for some reason. When I saw the blinds were drawn down on that compartment I thought I'd check."

"But what are you doing here, anyway?" Harry asked.

"I'm stationed in Hogsmeade now, to give the school extra protection," said Tonks.

"Is it just you who's stationed up here, or — ?"

"No, Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish are here too."

"Dawlish, that Auror Dumbledore attacked last year?"

"That's right."

They trudged up the dark, deserted lane, following the freshly made carriage tracks. Harry looked sideways at Tonks under his cloak. Last year she had been inquisitive (to the point of being a little annoying at times), she had laughed easily, she had made jokes. Now she seemed older and much more serious and purposeful. Was this all the effect of what had happened at the Ministry? He reflected uncomfortably that Hermione would have suggested he say something consoling about Sirius to her, that it hadn't been her fault at all, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was far from blaming her for Sirius's death; it was no more her fault than anyone else's (and much less than his), but he did not like talking about Sirius if he could avoid it. And so they tramped on through the cold night in silence, Tonks's long cloak whispering on the ground behind them.

Having always traveled there by carriage, Harry had never before appreciated just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade Station. With great relief he finally saw the tall pillars on either side of the gates, each topped with a winged boar. He was cold, he was hungry and he was quite keen to leave this new, gloomy Tonks behind. But when he put out a hand to push open the gates, he found them chained shut.

"Alohomora!" he said confidently, pointing his wand at the padlock, but nothing happened.

"That won't work on these," said Tonks. "Dumbledore bewitched them himself."

Harry looked around, "I could climb a wall," he suggested.

"No, you couldn't," said Tonks flatly. "Anti-intruder jinxes on all of them. Security's been tightened a hundredfold this summer."

"Well then," said Harry, starting to feel annoyed at her lack of helpfulness, "I suppose I'll just have to sleep out here and wait for morning."

"Someone's coming down for you," said Tonks, "Look."

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch's wheezy criticisms of his tardiness and rants about how his timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance."

"I couldn't change, I didn't have my —" Harry began, but Snape cut across him.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite — ah — safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally," said Snape, standing back to allow Harry to pass him, "I was interested to see your new Patronus."

He shut the gates in her face with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand again, so that they slithered, clinking, back into place.

"I think you were better off with the old one," said Snape, the malice in his voice unmistakable. "The new one looks weak."

As Snape swung the lantern about, Harry saw, fleetingly, a look of shock and anger on Tonks's face. Then she was covered in darkness once more.

"Good night," Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. "Thanks for ... everything,"

"See you, Harry."

Snape did not speak for a minute or so. Harry felt as though his body was generating waves of hatred so powerful that it seemed incredible that Snape could not feel them burning him. He had loathed Snape from their first encounter, but Snape had placed himself forever and irrevocably beyond the possibility of Harry's forgiveness by his attitude toward Sirius. Whatever Dumbledore said, Harry had had time to think over the summer, and had concluded that Snape's snide remarks to Sirius about remaining safely hidden while the rest of the Order of the Phoenix were off fighting Voldemort had probably been a powerful factor in Sirius rushing off to the Ministry the night that he had died. Harry clung to this notion, because it enabled him to blame Snape, which felt satisfying, and also because he knew that if anyone was not sorry that Sirius was dead, it was the man now striding next to him in the darkness.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think," said Snape. "And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I don't believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term: We haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."

The fury and hatred bubbling inside Harry seemed to blaze white-hot, but he would rather have been immobilized all the way back to London than tell Snape why he was late.

"I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" Snape continued. "And with no flying car available you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought to create a dramatic effect."

Still Harry remained silent, though he thought his chest might explode. He knew that Snape had come to fetch him for this, for the few minutes when he could needle and torment Harry without anyone else listening.

They reached the castle steps at last and as the great oaken front doors swung open into the vast flagged entrance hall, a burst of talk and laughter and of tinkling plates and glasses greeted them through the doors standing open into the Great Hall. Harry wondered whether he could slip his Invisibility Cloak back on, thereby gaining his seat at the long Gryffindor table (which, inconveniently, was the farthest from the entrance hall) without being noticed. As though he had read Harry's mind, however, Snape said, "No cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."

Harry turned on the spot and marched straight through the open doors: anything to get away from Snape. The Great Hall with its four long House tables and its staff table set at the top of the room was decorated as usual with floating candles that made the plates below glitter and glow. It was all a shimmering blur to Harry, however, who walked so fast that he was passing the Hufflepuff table before people really started to stare, and by the time they were standing up to get a good look at him, he had spotted Ron and Hermione, sped along the benches toward them, and forced his way in between them.

"Where've you — blimey, what've you done to your face?" said Ron, goggling at him along with everyone else in the vicinity. I

"Why, what's wrong with it?" said Harry, grabbing a spoon and squinting at his distorted reflection.

"You're covered in blood!" said Hermione. "Come here —"

She raised her wand, said "Tergeo!" and siphoned off the dried blood.

"Thanks," said Harry, feeling his now clean face. "How's my nose looking?"

"Normal," said Hermione anxiously. "Why shouldn't it? Harry, what happened? We've been terrified!"

"I'll tell you later," said Harry curtly. He was very conscious that Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were listening in; even Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had come floating along the bench to eavesdrop.

"But —" said Hermione.

"Not now, Hermione," said Harry, in a darkly significant voice. He hoped very much that they would all assume he had been involved in something heroic, preferably involving a couple of Death Eaters and a dementor. Of course, Malfoy would spread the story as wide as he could, but there was always a chance it wouldn't reach too many Gryffindor ears.

He reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and a handful of chips, but before he could take them they vanished, to be replaced with puddings.

"You missed the Sorting, anyway," said Hermione, as Ron dived for a large chocolate gateau.

"Hat say anything interesting?" asked Harry, taking a piece of treacle tart.

"More of the same, really . . . advising us all to unite in the face enemies, you know."

“Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort at all?”

“Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the the feast doesn't he? It can't be long now.”

“Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast —”

“You've seen Snape? How come?” said Ron between frenzied mouthfuls of gâteau.

“Bumped into him,” said Harry evasively.

“Hagrid was only a few minutes late,” said Hermione. “Look, he's waving at you, Harry.”

Harry looked up at the staff table and grinned at Hagrid, who was indeed waving at him. Hagrid had never quite managed to comport himself with the dignity of Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, the top of whose head came up to somewhere between Hagrid's elbow and shoulder as they were sitting side by side, and who was looking disapprovingly at this enthusiastic greeting. Harry was surprised to see the Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, sitting on Hagrid's other side; she rarely left her tower room, and he had never seen her at the start-of-term feast before. She looked as odd as ever, glittering with beads and trailing shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size by her spectacles. Having always considered her a bit of a fraud, Harry had been shocked to discover at the end of the previous term that it had been she who had made the prediction that caused Lord Voldemort to kill Harry's parents and attack Harry himself. The knowledge made him even less eager to find himself in her company, thankfully, this year he would be dropping Divination. Her great beaconlike eyes swiveled in his direction; he hastily looked away toward the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was miming the shattering of a nose to raucous laughter and

applause. Harry dropped his gaze to his treacle tart, his insides burning again. What he would give to fight Malfoy one-on-one...

"So what did Professor Slughorn want?" Hermione asked.

"To know what really happened at the Ministry." said Harry.

"Him and everyone else here," sniffed Hermione. "People were interrogating us about it on the train, weren't they, Ron?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "All wanting to know if you really are 'the Chosen One' —"

"There has been much talk on that very subject even amongst the ghosts," interrupted Nearly Headless Nick, inclining his barely connected head toward Harry so that it wobbled dangerously on its ruff. "I am considered something of a Potter authority; it is widely known that we are friendly. I have assured the spirit community that I will not pester you for information, however. 'Harry Potter knows that he can confide in me with complete confidence,' I told them. 'I would rather die than betray his trust.'"

"That's not saying much, seeing as you're already dead," Ron observed.

"Once again, you show all the sensitivity of a blunt axe," said Nearly Headless Nick in affronted tones, and he rose into the air and glided back toward the far end of the Gryffindor table just as Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. The talk and laughter echoing around the Hall died away almost instantly.

"The very best of evenings to you!" he said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide as though to embrace the whole room.

"What happened to his hand?" gasped Hermione.

She was not the only one who had noticed. Dumbledore's right hand was as blackened and dead-looking as it had been on the night he had come to fetch Harry from the Dursleys. Whispers in the room; Dumbledore,

interpreting them correctly, merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve over his injury.

"Nothing to worry about," he said airily. "Now ... to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you ..."

"His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer,"

Harry whispered to Hermione. "I thought he'd have cured it by now, though ... or Madam Pomfrey would've done."

"It looks as if it's died," said Hermione, with a nauseated expression. "But there are some injuries you can't cure... old curses...and there are poisons without antidotes. . . ."

"...and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise.

"We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year, Professor Slughorn"— Slughorn stood up, his bald head gleaming in the candlelight, his big waistcoated belly casting the table into shadow — "is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions master."

"Potions?"

"Potions?"

The word echoed all over the Hall as people wondered wheel they had heard right.

"Potions?" said Ron and Hermione together, turning to stare Harry. "But you said —"

"Professor Snape, meanwhile," said Dumbledore, raising voice so that it carried over all the muttering, "will be taking the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"No!" said Harry, so loudly that many heads turned in his direction. He did not care; he was staring up at the staff table, incensed. How could Snape be given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job after all this time? Hadn't it been widely known for years that Dumbledore did not trust him to do it?

"But Harry, you said that Slughorn was going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts!" said Hermione.

"I thought he was!" said Harry, racking his brains to remember when Dumbledore had told him this, but now that he came to think of it, he was unable to recall Dumbledore ever telling him what Slughorn would be teaching.

Snape, who was sitting on Dumbledore's right, did not stand up his mention of his name; he merely raised a hand in lazy acknowledgment of the applause from the Slytherin table, yet Harry was sure he could detect a look of triumph on the features he loathed so much.

"Well, there's one good thing," he said savagely. "Snape'll be gone by the end of the year."

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

"That job's jinxed. No ones lasted more than a year... Quirrell actually died doing it... Personally, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed for another death..."

"Harry!" said Hermione, shocked and reproachful.

"He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year," said Ron reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term. Moody didn't."

“Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not the only ones who had been talking; the whole Hall had erupted in a buzz of conversation at the news that Snape had finally achieved his heart’s desire. Seemingly oblivious to the sensational nature of the news he had just imparted, Dumbledore said nothing more about staff appointments, but waited a few seconds to ensure that the silence was absolute before continuing.

"Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength."

The silence seemed to tauten and strain as Dumbledore spoke. Harry glanced at Malfoy. Malfoy was not looking at Dumbledore, but making his fork hover in midair with his wand, as though he found the headmaster's words unworthy of his attention.

"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain safe. The castle’s magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that you teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them — in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others' safety."

Dumbledore's blue eyes swept over the students before he smiled once more.

"But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say good night. Pip pip!"

With the usual deafening scraping noise, the benches moved back and the hundreds of students began to file out of the Great Hall toward their dormitories. Harry, who was in no hurry at all to leave with the gawping crowd, nor to get near enough to Malfoy to allow him to retell the story of the nose-stamping, lagged behind, pretending to retie the lace on his trainer, allowing most of Gryffindors to draw ahead of him. Hermione had darted ahead to fulfill her prefect's duty of shepherding the first years, but Ron remained with Harry.

"What really happened to your nose?" he asked, once they were at the very back of the throng pressing out of the Hall, and out of earshot of anyone else.

Harry told him. It was a mark of the strength of their friendship that Ron did not laugh.

"I saw Malfoy miming something to do with a nose," he said darkly.

"Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry bitterly. "Listen to what he was saying before he found out I was there..."

"Harry had expected Ron to be stunned by Malfoys boasts. With what Harry considered pure pigheadedness, however, Ron was unimpressed.

"Come on, Harry, he was just showing off for Parkinson...."

What kind of mission would You-Know-Who have given him?"

"How d'you know Voldemort doesn't need someone at Hogwarts? It wouldn't be the first —"

"I wish yeh'd stop sayin' tha name, Harry," said a reproachful voice behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder to see Hagrid shaking his head.

"Dumbledore uses that name," said Harry stubbornly

"Yeah, well, tha's Dumbledore, innit?" said Hagrid mysteriously.

"So how come yeh were late, Harry? I was worried."

"Got held up on the train," said Harry. "Why were you late?"

"I was with Grawp," said Hagrid happily. "Los' track o' the time. He's got a new home up in the mountains now, Dumbledore fixed it — nice big cave. He's much happier than he was in the forest. We were havin' a good chat."

"Really?" said Harry, taking care not to catch Ron's eye; the last time he had met Hagrid's half-brother, a vicious giant with a talent for ripping up trees by the roots, his vocabulary had comprised five words, two of which he was unable to pronounce properly.

"Oh yeah, he's really come on," said Hagrid proudly. "Yeh'll be amazed. I'm thinkin' o' trainin' him up as me assistant."

Ron snorted loudly, but managed to pass it off as a violent sneeze. They were now standing beside the oak front doors.

"Anyway, I'll see yeh tomorrow, firs' lesson's straight after lunch. Come early an' yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Witherwings!"

Raising an arm in cheery farewell, he headed out of the doors into the darkness.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry could tell that Ron was experiencing the same sinking feeling as himself.

"You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you?"

Ron shook his head. "And you're not either, are you?"

Harry shook his head too.

"And Hermione," said Ron, "she's not, is she?"

Harry shook his head again. Exactly what Hagrid would say when he realized his three favorite students had given up his subject, he did not like to think.

Chapter 9: The Half-Blood Prince

Harry and Ron met Hermione in the common room before breakfast next morning. Hoping for some support in his theory, Harry lost no time in telling Hermione what he had overheard Malfoy saying on the Hogwarts Express.

"But he was obviously showing off for Parkinson, wasn't he?" interjected Ron quickly, before Hermione could say anything.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "I don't know. It would be like Malfoy to make himself seem more important than he is ... but that's a big lie to tell..."

"Exactly," said Harry, but he could not press the point, because so many people were trying to listen in to his conversation, not to mention staring at him and whispering behind their hands.

"It's rude to point," Ron snapped at a particularly minuscule first-year boy as they joined the queue to climb out of the portrait hole. The boy, who had been muttering something about Harry behind his hand to his friend, promptly turned scarlet and toppled out of the hole in alarm. Ron sniggered. "I love being a sixth year. And were going to be getting free time this year. Whole periods when we can just sit up here and relax."

"We're going to need that time for studying, Ron!" said Hermione, as they set off down the corridor.

"Yeah, but not today," said Ron. "Today's going to be a real loss, I reckon."

"Hold it!" said Hermione, throwing out an arm and halting a passing fourth year, who was attempting to push past her with a lime-green disk clutched tightly in his hand. "Fanged Frisbees banned, hand it over," she told him sternly. The scowling boy handed over the snarling Frisbee, ducked under her arm, and took off after his friends. Ron waited for him to vanish, then tugged the Frisbee from Hermione's grip.

"Excellent, I've always wanted one of these."

Hermione's remonstrations were drowned by a loud giggle; Lavender Brown had apparently found Ron's remark highly amusing. She continued to laugh as she passed them, glancing back at Ron over her shoulder. Ron looked rather pleased with himself.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was serenely blue and streaked with frail, wispy clouds, just like the squares of sky visible through the high mullioned windows. While they tucked into porridge and eggs and bacon, Harry and Ron told Hermione about their embarrassing conversation with Hagrid the previous evening.

"But he can't really think we'd continue Care of Magical Creatures!" she said, looking distressed. "I mean, when has any of us expressed . . . you know . . . any enthusiasm?"

"That's it, though, innit?" said Ron, swallowing an entire fried egg whole. "We were the ones who made the most effort in classes because we like

Hagrid. But he thinks we liked the stupid subject. D'ya reckon anyone's going to go on to N.E.W.T.?"

Neither Harry nor Hermione answered; there was no need. They knew perfectly well that nobody in their year would want to continue Care of Magical Creatures. They avoided Hagrid's eye and returned his cheery wave only half-heartedly when he left the staff table ten minutes later.

After they had eaten, they remained in their places, awaiting Professor McGonagall's descent from the staff table. The distribution of class schedules was more complicated than usual this year, for Professor McGonagall needed first to confirm that everybody had achieved the necessary O.W.L. grades to continue with their chosen N.E.W.T.s.

Hermione was immediately cleared to continue with Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions, and shot off to a first period Ancient Runes class without further ado. Neville took a little longer to sort out; his round face was anxious as Professor McGonagall looked down his application and then consulted his O.W.L. results.

"Herbology, fine," she said. "Professor Sprout will be delighted to see you back with an 'Outstanding' O.W.L. And you qualify for Defense Against the Dark Arts with 'Exceeds Expectations.' But the problem is Transfiguration. I'm sorry, Longbottom, but an 'Acceptable' really isn't good enough to continue to N.E.W.T. level. Just don't think you'd be able to cope with the coursework."

Neville hung his head. Professor McGonagall peered at him through her square spectacles.

"Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I've never had the impression that you particularly enjoyed it."

Neville looked miserable and muttered something about "my grandmother wants."

"Hmph," snorted Professor McGonagall. "It's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have - particularly after what happened at the Ministry."

Neville turned very pink and blinked confusedly; Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before.

"I'm sorry, Longbottom, but I cannot let you into my N.E.W.T. class. I see that you have an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Charm however - why not try for a N.E.W.T. in Charms?"

"My grandmother thinks Charms is a soft option," mumbled Neville.

"Take Charms," said Professor McGonagall, "and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because she failed her Charms O.W.L., the subject is not necessarily worthless." Smiling slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville's face, Professor McGonagall tapped a blank

schedule with the tip of her wand and handed it, now carrying details of his new classes, to Neville.

Professor McGonagall turned next to Parvati Patil, whose first question was whether Firenze, the handsome centaur, was still teaching Divination.

"He and Professor Trelawney are dividing classes between them this year," said Professor McGonagall, a hint of disapproval in her voice; it was common knowledge that she despised the subject of Divination. "The sixth year is being taken by Professor Trelawney."

Parvati set off for Divination five minutes later looking slightly crestfallen.

"So, Potter, Potter . . ." said Professor McGonagall, consulting her notes as she turned to Harry. "Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration ... all fine. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration mark, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven't you applied to continue with Potions? I thought it was your ambition to become an Auror?"

"It was, but you told me I had to get an 'Outstanding' in my O.W.L., Professor."

"And so you did when Professor Snape was teaching the subject. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to accept N.E.W.T. students with 'Exceeds Expectations' at O.W.L. Do you wish to proceed with Potions?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but I didn't buy the books or any ingredients or anything-"

"I'm sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some," said Professor McGonagall. "Very well, Potter, here is your schedule. Oh, by the way- twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up trials at your leisure."

A few minutes later, Ron was cleared to do the same subjects as Harry, and the two of them left the table together.

"Look," said Ron delightedly, gazing at his schedule, "we've got a free period now. . . and a free period after break . . . and after lunch . . . excellent."

They returned to the common room, which was empty apart from a half dozen seventh years, including Katie Bell, the only remaining member of the original Gryffindor Quidditch team that Harry had joined in his first year.

"I thought you'd get that, well done," she called over, pointing at the Captains badge on Harry's chest. "Tell me when you call trials!"

"Don't be stupid," said Harry, "you don't need to try out, I watched you play for five years. . . ."

"You mustn't start off like that," she said warningly. "For all you know, there's someone much better than me out there. Good teams have been ruined before now because Captains just kept playing the old faces, or letting in their friends...."

Ron looked a little uncomfortable and began playing with the Fanged Frisbee Hermione had taken from the fourth-year student. It zoomed around the common room, snarling and attempting to take bites of the tapestry. Crookshanks's yellow eyes followed it and he hissed when it came too close.

An hour later they reluctantly left the sunlit common room for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom four floors below. Hermione was already queuing outside, carrying an armful of heavy books and looking put-upon.

"We got so much homework for Runes," she said anxiously when Harry and Ron joined her. "A fifteen-inch essay, two translations, and I've got to read these by Wednesday!"

"Shame," yawned Ron.

"You wait," she said resentfully. "I bet Snape gives us loads."

The classroom door opened as she spoke, and Snape stepped into the corridor, his sallow face framed as ever by two curtains of greasy black hair. Silence fell over the queue immediately.

"Inside," he said.

Harry looked around as they entered. Snape had imposed his personality upon the room already; it was gloomier than usual, as curtains had been drawn over the windows, and was lit by candlelight. New pictures adorned the walls, many of them showing people who appeared to be in pain, sporting grisly injuries or strangely contorted body parts. Nobody spoke as they settled down, looking around at the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

"I have not asked you to take out your books," said Snape, closing the door and moving to face the class from behind his desk; Hermione hastily dropped her copy of *Confronting the Faceless* back into her bag and stowed it under her chair. "I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention."

His black eyes roved over their upturned faces, lingering for a fraction of a second longer on Harry's than anyone else's.

"You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe."

You believe . . . like you haven't watched them all come and go, hoping you'd be next, thought Harry scathingly.

"Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an O.W.L. in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the N.E.W.T. work, which will be more advanced."

Snape set off around the edge of the room, speaking now in a lower voice; the class craned their necks to keep him in view. "The Dark Arts," said Snape, "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."

Harry stared at Snape. It was surely one thing to respect the Dark Arts as a dangerous enemy, another to speak of them, as Snape was doing, with a loving caress in his voice?

"Your defenses," said Snape, a little louder, "must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. These pictures" - he indicated a few of them as he swept past - "give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse" - he waved a hand toward a witch who was clearly shrieking in agony - "feel the Dementor's Kiss" - a wizard lying huddled and blank-eyed, slumped against a wall - "or provoke the aggression of the Inferius" - a bloody mass upon ground.

"Has an Inferius been seen, then?" said Parvati Patil in a high pitched voice. "Is it definite, is he using them?"

"The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," said Snape, "which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now. . ."

He set off again around the other side of the classroom toward his desk, and again, they watched him as he walked, his dark robes billowing behind him. ,

". . . you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air. Snape took his time looking around at everybody else, making sure he had no choice, before saying curtly, "Very well - Miss Granger?"

"Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform," said Hermione, "which gives you a split-second advantage."

"An answer copied almost word for word from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six," said Snape dismissively (over in the corner, Malfoy sniggered), "but correct in essentials. Yes, those who progress in using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some" - his gaze lingered maliciously upon Harry once more - "lack."

Harry knew Snape was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons of the previous year. He refused to drop his gaze, but glowered at Snape until Snape looked away.

"You will now divide," Snape went on, "into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."

Although Snape did not know it, Harry had taught at least half the class (everyone who had been a member of the D.A.) how to perform a Shield Charm the previous year. None of them had ever cast the charm without speaking, however. A reasonable amount of cheating ensued; many people were merely whispering the incantation instead of saying it aloud. Typically, ten minutes into the lesson Hermione managed to repel Neville's muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx without uttering a single word, a feat that would surely have earned her twenty points for Gryffindor from any reasonable teacher, thought Harry bitterly, but which Snape ignored. He swept between them as they practiced, looking just as much like an overgrown bat as ever, lingering to watch Harry and Ron struggling with the task.

Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face, his lips tightly compressed to save himself from the temptation of muttering the incantation. Harry had his wand raised, waiting on tenterhooks to repel a jinx that seemed unlikely ever to come.

"Pathetic, Weasley," said Snape, after a while. "Here -- let me show you--"

He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he yelled, "Protego!"

His Shield Charm was so strong Snape was knocked off-balance and hit a desk. The whole class had looked around and now watched as Snape righted himself, scowling.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practicing nonverbal spells, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry stiffly.

"Yes, sir."

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor." The words had escaped him before he knew what he was saying. Several people gasped, including Hermione. Behind Snape, however, Ron, Dean, and Seamus grinned appreciatively.

"Detention, Saturday night, my office," said Snape. "I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter . . . not even 'the Chosen One.'"

"That was brilliant, Harry!" chortled Ron, once they were safely on their way to break a short while later.

"You really shouldn't have said it," said Hermione, frowning at Ron. "What made you?"

"He tried to jinx me, in case you didn't notice!" fumed Harry. I had enough of that during those Occlumency lessons! Why doesn't he use

another guinea pig for a change? What's Dumbledore playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense? Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! All that unfixed, indestructible stuff –“

"Well," said Hermione, "I thought he sounded a bit like you."

"Like me?"

"Yes, when you were telling us what it's like to face Voldemort. You said it wasn't just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it was just you and your brains and your guts - well, wasn't that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-thinking?"

Harry was so disarmed that she had thought his words as well worth memorizing as *The Standard Book of Spells* that he did not argue.

"Harry! Hey, Harry!"

Harry looked around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters on last year's Gryffindor Quidditch team, was hurrying toward him holding a roll of parchment.

"For you," panted Sloper. "Listen, I heard you're the new Captain. When're you holding trials?"

"I'm not sure yet," said Harry, thinking privately that Sloper would be very lucky to get back on the team. "I'll let you know."

"Oh, right. I was hoping it'd be this weekend -"

"But Harry was not listening; he had just recognized the thin, slanting writing on the parchment. Leaving Sloper in mid-sentence, he hurried away with Ron and Hermione, unrolling the parchment as he went.

*Dear Harry,
I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday. Kindly come along to my office at 8 P.M. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.*

Yours sincerely,

*Albus Dumbledore
P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.*

"He enjoys Acid Pops?" said Ron, who had read the message over Harry's shoulder and was looking perplexed.

"It's the password to get past the gargoyle outside his study," said Harry in a low voice. "Ha! Snape's not going to be pleased. . . . I won't be able to do his detention!"

He, Ron, and Hermione spent the whole of break speculating on what Dumbledore would teach Harry. Ron thought it most likely to be spectacular jinxes and hexes of the type the Death Eaters would not know. Hermione said such things were illegal, and thought it much more likely that Dumbledore wanted to teach Harry advanced Defensive magic. After break, she went off to Arithmancy while Harry and Ron returned to the common

room where they grudgingly started Snape's homework. This turned out to be so complex that they still had not finished when Hermione joined them for their after-lunch free period (though she considerably speeded up the process). They had only just finished when the bell rang for the afternoon's double Potions and they beat the familiar path down to the dungeon classroom that had, for so long, been Snape's.

When they arrived in the corridor they saw that there were only a dozen people progressing to N.E.W.T. level. Crabbe and Goyle had evidently failed to achieve the required O.W.L. grade, but four Slytherins had made it through, including Malfoy. Four Ravenclaws were there, and one Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry liked despite his rather pompous manner.

"Harry," Ernie said portentously, holding out his hand as Harry approached, "didn't get a chance to speak in Defense Against The Dark Arts this morning. Good lesson, I thought, but Shield Charms are old hat, of course, for us old D.A. lags . . . And how are you, Ron -- Hermione?"

Before they could say more than "fine," the dungeon door opened and Slughorn's belly preceded him out of the door. As they filed into the room, his great walrus mustache curved above his beaming mouth, and he greeted Harry and Zabini with particular enthusiasm.

The dungeon was, most unusually, already full of vapors and odd smells. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sniffed interestedly as they passed large, bubbling cauldrons. The four Slytherins took a table together, as did the four

Ravenclaws. This left Harry, Ron, and Hermione to share a table with Ernie. They chose the one nearest a gold-colored cauldron that was emitting one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion's fumes seemed to be filling him up like drink. A great contentment stole over him; he grinned across at Ron, who grinned back lazily.

"Now then, now then, now then," said Slughorn, whose massive outline was quivering through the many shimmering vapors. "Scales out, everyone, and potion kits, and don't forget your copies of Advanced Potion-Making. . . ."

"Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand.

"Harry, m'boy?"

"I haven't got a book or scales or anything - nor's Ron - we didn't realize we'd be able to do the N.E.W.T., you see -"

"Ah, yes, Professor McGonagall did mention . . . not to worry, my dear boy, not to worry at all. You can use ingredients from the store cupboard today, and I'm sure we can lend you some scales, and we've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts. . . ."

Slughorn strode over to a corner cupboard and, after a moment's foraging, emerged with two very battered-looking copies of Advanced Potion-Making by Libatius Borage, which he gave to Harry and Ron along with two sets of tarnished scales.

"Now then," said Slughorn, returning to the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons on his waistcoat threatened to burst off, "I've prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to make after completing your N.E.W.T.s. You ought to have heard of 'em, even if you haven't made 'em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?"

He indicated the cauldron nearest the Slytherin table. Harry raised himself slightly in his seat and saw what looked like plain water boiling away inside it.

Hermione's well-practiced hand hit the air before anybody else's; Slughorn pointed at her.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth," said Hermione.

"Very good, very good!" said Slughorn happily. "Now," he continued, pointing at the cauldron nearest the Ravenclaw table, "this one here is pretty well known... Featured in a few Ministry leaflets lately too... Who can - ?"

Hermione's hand was fastest once more.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she said.

Harry too had recognized the slow-bubbling, mudlike substance the second cauldron, but did not resent Hermione getting the credit for answering the question; she, after all, was the one who had succeeded in making it, back in their second year. "Excellent, excellent! Now, this one here . . . yes, my dear?" said Slughorn, now looking slightly bemused, as Hermione's hand punched the air again.

"It's Amortentia!"

"It is indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask," said Slughorn, who was looking mightily impressed, "but I assume you know what it does?"

"It's the most powerful love porion in the world!" said Hermione.

"Quite right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?"

"And the steam rising in characteristic spirals," said Hermione enthusiastically, "and it's supposed to smell differently to each of according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and -"

But she turned slightly pink and did not complete the sentence.

'May I ask your name, my dear?' said Slughorn, ignoring Hermione's embarrassment.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

"Granger? Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?"

"No. I don't think so, sir. I'm Muggle-born, you see."

Harry saw Malfoy lean close to Nott and whisper something; both of them sniggered, but Slughorn showed no dismay; on the contrary, he beamed and looked from Hermione to Harry, who was sitting next to her.

"Oho! 'One of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she's the best in our year!' I'm assuming this is the very friend of whom you spoke, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," said Slughorn genially.

Malfoy looked rather as he had done the time Hermione had punched him in the face. Hermione turned to Harry with a radiant expression and whispered, "Did you really tell him I'm the best in the year? Oh, Harry!"

"Well, what's so impressive about that?" whispered Ron, who for some reason looked annoyed. "You are the best in the year - I'd've told him so if he'd asked me!"

Hermione smiled but made a "shhing" gesture, so that they could hear what Slughorn was saying. Ron looked slightly disgruntled.

"Amortentia doesn't really create love, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession. It is probably the most dangerous and powerful potion in this room - oh yes," he said, nodding gravely at Malfoy and Nott, both of whom were smirking skeptically. "When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love."

"And now," said Slughorn, "it is time for us to start work."

"Sir, you haven't told us what's in this one," said Ernie Macmillan, pointing at a small black cauldron standing on Slughorn's desk. The potion within was splashing about merrily; it was the color of molten gold, and large drops were leaping like goldfish above the surface, though not a particle had spilled.

"Oho," said Slughorn again. Harry was sure that Slughorn had not forgotten the potion at all, but had waited to be asked for dramatic effect. "Yes. That. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it," he turned, smiling, to look at

Hermione, who had let out an audible gasp, "that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?"

"It's liquid luck," said Hermione excitedly. "It makes you lucky!"

The whole class seemed to sit up a little straighter. Now all Harry could see of Malfoy was the back of his sleek blond head, because he was at last giving Slughorn his full and undivided attention.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis," said Slughorn. "Desperately tricky to make, and disastrous to get wrong. However, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavors tend to succeed ... at least until the effects wear off."

"Why don't people drink it all the time, sir?" said Terry Boot eagerly.

"Because if taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence," said Slughorn. "Too much of a good thing, you know. . . highly toxic in large quantities. But taken sparingly, and very occasionally . . ."

"Have you ever taken it, sir?" asked Michael Corner with great interest.

"Twice in my life," said Slughorn. "Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls taken with breakfast. Two perfect days."

He gazed dreamily into the distance. Whether he was playacting or not, thought Harry, the effect was good.

"And that," said Slughorn, apparently coming back to earth, "is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson."

There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the surrounding potions seemed magnified tenfold.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis," said Slughorn, taking a minuscule glass bottle with a cork in it out of his pocket and showing it to them all. "Enough for twelve hours' luck. From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt."

"Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions . . . sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only . . . and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

"So," said Slughorn, suddenly brisk, "how are you to win this fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

There was a scraping as everyone drew their cauldrons toward them and some loud clunks as people began adding weights to their scales, but nobody spoke. The concentration within the room was almost tangible. Harry saw Malfoy riffling feverishly through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. It could not have been clearer that Malfoy really wanted that lucky day. Harry bent swiftly over the tattered book Slughorn had lent him.

To his annoyance he saw that the previous owner had scribbled all over the pages, so that the margins were as black as the printed portions. Bending low to decipher the ingredients (even here, the previous owner had made annotations and crossed things out) Harry hurried off toward the store cupboard to find what he needed. As he dashed back to his cauldron, he saw Malfoy cutting up Valerian roots as fast as he could.

Everyone kept glancing around at what the rest of the class was doing; this was both an advantage and a disadvantage of Potions, that it was hard to keep your work private. Within ten minutes, the whole place was full of bluish steam. Hermione, of course, seemed to have progressed furthest. Her potion already resembled the "smooth, black currant-colored liquid" mentioned as the ideal halfway stage.

Having finished chopping his roots, Harry bent low over his book again. It was really very irritating, having to try and decipher the directions under all the stupid scribbles of the previous owner, who for some reason had taken issue with the order to cut up the sopophorous bean and had written in the alternative instruction:

*Crush with flat side of silver dagger,
releases juice better than cutting.*

"Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?" Harry looked up; Slughorn was just passing the Slytherin table.

"Yes," said Slughorn, without looking at Malfoy, "I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course it wasn't unexpected, dragon pox at his age..."

And he walked away. Harry bent back over his cauldron, smirking. He could tell that Malfoy had expected to be treated like Harry or Zabini; perhaps even hoped for some preferential treatment of the type he had learned to expect from Snape. It looked as though Malfoy would have to rely on nothing but talent to win the bottle of Felix Felicis.

The soporiferous bean was proving very difficult to cut up. Harry turned to Hermione.

"Can I borrow your silver knife?"

She nodded impatiently, not taking her eyes off her potion, which was still deep purple, though according to the book ought to be turning a light shade of lilac by now.

Harry crushed his bean with the flat side of the dagger. To his astonishment, it immediately exuded so much juice he was amazed the shriveled bean could have held it all.

Hastily scooping it all into the cauldron he saw, to his surprise, that the potion immediately turned exactly the shade of lilac described by the textbook.

His annoyance with the previous owner vanishing on the spot, Harry now squinted at the next line of instructions. According the book, he had to stir counterclockwise until the potion turned clear as water. According to the addition the previous owner made, however, he ought to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir. Could the old owner be right twice?

Harry stirred counterclockwise, held his breath, and stirred once clockwise. The effect was immediate. The potion turned pale pink.

"How are you doing that?" demanded Hermione, who was redfaced and whose hair was growing bushier and bushier in the fumes from her cauldron; her potion was still resolutely purple.

"Add a clockwise stir -"

"No, no, the book says counterclockwise!" she snapped.

Harry shrugged and continued what he was doing. Seven stirs counterclockwise, one clockwise, pause . . . seven stirs counterclockwise, one stir clockwise . . .

Across the table, Ron was cursing fluently under his breath; his potion looked like liquid licorice. Harry glanced around. As far as he could see, no one else's potion had turned as pale as his. He felt elated, something that had certainly never happened before in this dungeon.

"And time's . . . up!" called Slughorn. "Stop stirring, please!"

Slughorn moved slowly among the tables, peering into cauldrons. He made no comment, but occasionally gave the potions a stir or a sniff. At last he reached the table where Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie were sitting. He smiled ruefully at the tarlike substance in Ron's cauldron. He passed over Ernie's navy concoction. Hermione's potion he gave an approving nod. Then he saw Harry's, and a look of incredulous delight spread over his face.

"The clear winner!" he cried to the dungeon. "Excellent, excellent, Harry! Good lord, it's clear you've inherited your mother's talent. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was! Here you are, then, here you are - one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!"

Harry slipped the tiny bottle of golden liquid into his inner pocket, feeling an odd combination of delight at the furious looks on the Slytherins' faces and guilt at the disappointed expression on Hermione's. Ron looked simply dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" he whispered to Harry as they left the dungeon.

"Got lucky, I suppose," said Harry, because Malfoy was within earshot.

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them. Hermione's face became stonier with every word he uttered.

"I s'pose you think I cheated?" he finished, aggravated by her expression.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?" she said stiffly.

"He only followed different instructions to ours," said Ron, "Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk and it paid off." He heaved a sigh. "Slughorn could've handed me that book, but no, I get the one no one's ever written on. Puked on, by the look of page fifty-two, but-"

"Hang on," said a voice close by Harry's left ear and he caught a sudden waft of that flowery smell he had picked up in Slughorn's dungeon. He looked around and saw that Ginny had joined them. "Did I hear right? You've been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"

She looked alarmed and angry. Harry knew what was on her mind at once.

"It's nothing," he said reassuringly, lowering his voice. "It's not like, you know, Riddle's diary. It's just an old textbook someone's scribbled on."

"But you're doing what it says?"

"I just tried a few of the tips written in the margins, honestly, Ginny, there's nothing funny -"

"Ginny's got a point," said Hermione, perking up at once. "We ought to check that there's nothing odd about it. I mean, all these funny instructions, who knows?"

"Hey!" said Harry indignantly, as she pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and raised her wand. "Specialis Revelio!" she said, rapping it smartly on the front cover. Nothing whatsoever happened. The book simply lay there, looking old and dirty and dog-eared.

"Finished?" said Harry irritably. "Or d'you want to wait and see if it does a few backflips?"

"It seems all right," said Hermione, still staring at the book suspiciously. "I mean, it really does seem to be ... just a textbook."

"Good. Then I'll have it back," said Harry, snatching it off the table, but it slipped from his hand and landed open on the floor. Nobody else was looking. Harry bent low to retrieve the book, and as he did so, he saw something scribbled along the bottom of the back cover in the same small,

cramped handwriting as the instructions that had won him his bottle of Felix Felicis, now safely hidden inside a pair of socks in his trunk upstairs.

This book is the property of the Half Blood Prince.

Chapter 10: The Hour of Gaunt

For or the rest of the week's Potions lessons Harry continued to follow the Half-Blood Prince's instructions wherever they deviated from Libatius Borage's, with the result that by their fourth lesson Slughorn was raving about Harry's abilities, saying that he had rarely taught anyone so talented. Neither Ron nor Hermione was delighted by this. Although Harry had offered to share his book with both of them, Ron had more difficulty deciphering the handwriting than Harry did, and could not keep asking Harry to read aloud or it might look suspicious. Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the "official" instructions, but becoming increasingly bad-tempered as they yielded poorer results than the Prince's.

Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been. Although the amount of homework they had been given prevented him from reading the whole of his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, he had skimmed through it sufficiently to see that there was barely a page on which the Prince had not made additional notes, not all of them concerned with potion-making. Here and there were directions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself.

"Or herself," said Hermione irritably, overhearing Harry pointing some of these out to Ron in the common room on Saturday evening. "It might have been a girl. I think the handwriting looks more like a girl's than a boy's."

"The Half-Blood Prince, he was called," Harry said. "How many girls have been Princes?"

Hermione seemed to have no answer to this. She merely scowled and twitched her essay on The Principles of Rematerialization away from Ron, who was trying to read it upside down.

Harry looked at his watch and hurriedly put the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making back into his bag.

"It's five to eight, I'd better go, I'll be late for Dumbledore."

"Ooooh!" gasped Hermione, looking up at once. "Good luck! We'll wait up, we want to hear what he teaches you!"

"Hope it goes okay," said Ron, and the pair of them watched Harry leave through the portrait hole.

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared around a corner, muttering to herself as she shuffled a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked.

"Two of spades: conflict," she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. "Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —"

She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry's statue.

"Well, that can't be right," she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving nothing but a whiff of cooking sherry behind her. Harry waited until he was quite sure she had gone, then hurried off again until he reached the spot in the seventh-floor corridor where a single gargoyle stood against the wall.

"Acid Pops," said Harry, and the gargoyle leapt aside; the wall behind it slid apart, and a moving spiral stone staircase was revealed, onto which Harry stepped, so that he was carried in smooth circles up to the door with the brass knocker that led to Dumbledore's Office.

Harry knocked.

"Come in," said Dumbledore's voice.

"Good evening, sir," said Harry, walking into the headmaster's office.

"Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I hope you've had an enjoyable first week back at school?" "Yes, thanks, sir," said Harry.

"You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already!" "Er," began Harry awkwardly, but Dumbledore did not look too stern.

"I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your detention next Saturday instead."

"Right," said Harry, who had more pressing matters on his mind than Snape's detention, and now looked around surreptitiously for some indication of what Dumbledore was planning to do with him this evening. The circular office looked just as it always did; the delicate silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, puffing smoke and whirring; portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and Dumbledore's magnificent phoenix, Fawkes, stood on his perch behind the door, watching Harry with bright interest. It did not even look as though Dumbledore had cleared a space for dueling practice.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore, in a businesslike voice. "You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for you during these — for want of a better word — lessons?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information." There was a pause.

"You said, at the end of last term, you were going to tell me everything," said Harry. It was hard to keep a note of accusation from his voice. "Sir," he added.

"And so I did," said Dumbledore placidly. "I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm foundation of fact and

journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who believed the time was ripe for a cheese cauldron."

"But you think you're right?" said Harry.

"Naturally I do, but as I have already proven to you, I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being — forgive me — rather cleverer than most men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger."

"Sir," said Harry tentatively, "does what you're going to tell me have anything to do with the prophecy? Will it help me . . . survive?"

"It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy," said Dumbledore, as casually as if Harry had asked him about the next days weather, "and I certainly hope that it will help you to survive."

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk, past Harry, who turned eagerly in his seat to watch Dumbledore bending over the cabinet beside the door. When Dumbledore straightened up, he was holding a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim. He placed the Pensieve on the desk in front of Harry.

"You look worried."

Harry had indeed been eyeing the Pensieve with some apprehension. His previous experiences with the odd device that stored and revealed thoughts

and memories, though highly instructive, had also been uncomfortable. The last time he had disturbed its contents, he had seen much more than he would have wished. But Dumbledore was smiling.

"This time, you enter the Pensieve with me . . . and, even more unusually, with permission."

"Where are we going, sir?"

"For a trip down Bob Ogden's memory lane," said Dumbledore, pulling from his pocket a crystal bottle containing a swirling silvery-white substance.

"Who was Bob Ogden?"

"He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," said Dumbledore. "He died some time ago, but not before I had tracked him down and persuaded him to confide these recollections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties. If you will stand, Harry ..."

But Dumbledore was having difficulty pulling out the stopper of the crystal bottle: His injured hand seemed stiff and painful.

"Shall —shall I, sir?"

"No matter, Harry —"

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

"Sir — how did you injure your hand?" Harry asked again, looking at the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion and pity.

"Now is not the moment for that story, Harry. Not yet. We have an appointment with Bob Ogden."

Dumbledore tipped the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither liquid nor gas. "After you," said Dumbledore, gesturing toward the bowl. Harry bent forward, took a deep breath, and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the office floor; he was falling, falling through whirling darkness and then, quite sud-denly, he was blinking in dazzling sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore landed beside him.

They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blue as a forget-me-not. Some ten feet in front of them stood a short, plump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assortment of clothes so often chosen by inexperienced wizards trying to look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before

Harry had time to do more than register his bizarre appearance, however, Ogden had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing back the way they had come read: Great Hangleton, 5 miles. The arm pointing after Ogden said Little Hangleton, 1 mile.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock-coated figure ahead. Then the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of them. Harry could see a village, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor house surrounded by a wide expanse of velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep downward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Harry hurried to keep up. He thought Little Hangleton must be their final destination and wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it from such a distance. He soon discovered that he was mistaken in thinking that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it was to see the very edge of Ogden's frock coat vanishing through a gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those they had left behind. The path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping down-hill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, the track soon opened up at the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

Despite the cloudless sky, the old trees ahead cast deep, dark, cool shadows, and it was a few seconds before Harry's eyes discerned the building half-hidden amongst the tangle of trunks. It seemed to him a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees growing nearby, blocking all light and the view of the valley below. He wondered whether it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the rafters were visible in places. Nettles grew all around it, their tips reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. Just as he had concluded that nobody could possibly live there, however, one of the windows was thrown open with a clatter, and a thin trickle of steam or smoke issued from it, as though somebody was cooking.

Ogden moved forward quietly and, it seemed to Harry, rather cautiously. As the dark shadows of the trees slid over him, he stopped again, staring at the front door, to which somebody had nailed a dead snake.

Then there was a rustle and a crack, and a man in rags dropped from the nearest tree, landing on his feet right in front of Ogden, who leapt backward so fast he stood on the tails of his frock coat and stumbled.

"You're not welcome."

The man standing before them had thick hair so matted with dirt it could have been any color. Several of his teeth were missing. His eyes were small and dark and stared in opposite directions. He might have looked comical, but he did not; the effect was frightening, and Harry could not blame Ogden for backing away several more paces before he spoke.

"Er — good morning. I'm from the Ministry of Magic —" "You're not welcome."

"Er — I'm sorry — I don't understand you," said Ogden nervously.

Harry thought Ogden was being extremely dim; the stranger was making himself very clear in Harry's opinion, particularly as he was brandishing a wand in one hand and a short and rather bloody knife in the other.

"You understand him, I'm sure, Harry?" said Dumbledore quietly. "Yes, of course," said Harry, slightly nonplussed. "Why can't Ogden — ?"

But as his eyes found the dead snake on the door again, he suddenly understood.

"He's speaking Parseltongue?"

"Very good," said Dumbledore, nodding and smiling.

The man in rags was now advancing on Ogden, knife in one hand, wand in the other.

"Now, look —" Ogden began, but too late: There was a bang, and Ogden was on the ground, clutching his nose, while a nasty yellowish goo squirted from between his fingers.

"Morfin!" said a loud voice.

An elderly man had come hurrying out of the cottage, banging the door behind him so that the dead snake swung pathetically. This man was shorter than the first, and oddly proportioned; his shoulders were very broad and his arms overlong, which, with his bright brown eyes, short scrubby hair, and wrinkled face, gave him the look of a powerful, aged monkey. He came to a halt beside the man with the knife, who was now cackling with laughter at the sight of Ogden on the ground.

"Ministry, is it?" said the older man, looking down at Ogden. "Correct!" said Ogden angrily, dabbing his face. "And you, I take it, are Mr. Gaunt?"

"S'right," said Gaunt. "Got you in the face, did he?" "Yes, he did!" snapped Ogden.

"Should've made your presence known, shouldn't you?" said Gaunt aggressively. "This is private property. Can't just walk in here and not expect my son to defend himself."

"Defend himself against what, man?" said Ogden, clambering back to his feet.

"Busybodies. Intruders. Muggles and filth." Ogden pointed his wand at his own nose, which was still issuing large amounts of what looked like yellow pus, and the flow stopped at once. Mr. Gaunt spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Morfin. "Get in the house. Don't argue."

This time, ready for it, Harry recognized Parseltongue; even while he could understand what was being said, he distinguished the weird hissing noise that was all Ogden could hear. Morfin seemed to be on the point of disagreeing, but when his father cast him a threatening look he changed his mind, lumbering away to the cottage with an odd rolling gait and slamming the front door behind him, so that the snake swung sadly again.

"It's your son I'm here to see, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, as he mopped the last of the pus from the front of his coat. "That was Morfin, wasn't it?"

"Ah, that was Morfin," said the old man indifferently. "Are you pure-blood?" he asked, suddenly aggressive.

"That's neither here nor there," said Ogden coldly, and Harry felt his respect for Ogden rise. Apparently Gaunt felt rather differently.

He squinted into Ogden's face and muttered, in what was clearly supposed to be an offensive tone, "Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the village."

"I don't doubt it, if your son's been let loose on them," said Ogden. "Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?"

"Inside?"

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I've already told you. I'm here about Morfin. We sent an owl —"

"I've no use for owls," said Gaunt. "I don't open letters."

"Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of visitors," said Ogden tartly. "I am here following a serious breach of Wizarding law, which occurred here in the early hours of this morning —"

"All right, all right, all right!" bellowed Gaunt. "Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it'll do you!"

The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room combined. Morfin was sitting in a filthy armchair beside the smoking fire, twisting a live adder between his thick fingers and crooning softly at it in Parseltongue:

*Hissy, hissy, little snakey,
Slither on the floor
You be good to Morfin
Or he'll nail you to the door.*

There was a scuffling noise in the corner beside the open window, and Harry realized that there was somebody else in the room, a girl whose ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stone wall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with the shelf of squalid-looking pots and pans above it. Her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person.

"M'daughter, Merope," said Gaunt grudgingly, as Ogden looked inquiringly toward her.

"Good morning," said Ogden.

She did not answer, but with a frightened glance at her father turned her back on the room and continued shifting the pots on the shelf behind her.

"Well, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, "to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son, Morfin, performed magic in front of a Muggle late last night."

There was a deafening clang. Merope had dropped one of the pots.

"Pick it up!" Gaunt bellowed at her. "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you useless sack of muck?"

"Mr. Gaunt, please!" said Ogden in a shocked voice, as Merope, who had already picked up the pot, flushed blotchily scarlet, lost her grip on the pot again, drew her wand shakily from her pocket, pointed it at the pot, and muttered a hasty, inaudible spell that caused the pot to shoot across the floor away from her, hit the opposite wall, and crack in two.

Morfin let out a mad cackle of laughter. Gaunt screamed, "Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"

Merope stumbled across the room, but before she had time to raise her wand, Ogden had lifted his own and said firmly, "Reparo. " The pot mended itself instantly.

Gaunt looked for a moment as though he was going to shout at Ogden, but seemed to think better of it: Instead, he jeered at his daughter, "Lucky the nice man from the Ministry's here, isn't it? Perhaps he'll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn't mind dirty Squibs. . . ."

Without looking at anybody or thanking Ogden, Merope picked up the pot and returned it, hands trembling, to its shelf. She then stood quite still, her back against the wall between the filthy window and the stove, as though she wished for nothing more than to sink into the stone and vanish.

"Mr. Gaunt," Ogden began again, "as I've said: the reason for my visit —"

"I heard you the first time!" snapped Gaunt. "And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him — what about it, then?"

"Morfin has broken Wizarding law," said Ogden sternly.

"Morfin has broken Wizarding law." Gaunt imitated Ogden's voice, making it pompous and singsong. Morfin cackled again. "He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson, that's illegal now, is it?"

"Yes," said Ogden. "I'm afraid it is."

He pulled from an inside pocket a small scroll of parchment and unrolled it.

"What's that, then, his sentence?" said Gaunt, his voice rising angrily.

"It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing —"

"Summons! Summons? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?"

"I'm Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad," said Ogden.

"And you think we're scum, do you?" screamed Gaunt, advancing on Ogden now, with a dirty yellow-nailed finger pointing at his chest. "Scum who'll come running when the Ministry tells 'em to? Do you know who you're talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?"

"I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, looking wary, but standing his ground.

"That's right!" roared Gaunt. For a moment, Harry thought Gaunt was making an obscene hand gesture, but then realized that he was showing Ogden the ugly, black-stoned ring he was wearing on his middle finger, waving it before Ogden's eyes. "See this? See this? Know what it is? Know where it came from? Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?"

"I've really no idea," said Ogden, blinking as the ring sailed within an inch of his nose, "and it's quite beside the point, Mr. Gaunt. Your son has committed —"

With a howl of rage, Gaunt ran toward his daughter. For a split second, Harry thought he was going to throttle her as his hand flew to her throat; next moment, he was dragging her toward Ogden by a gold chain around her neck.

"See this?" he bellowed at Ogden, shaking a heavy gold locket at him, while Merope spluttered and gasped for breath.

"I see it, I see it!" said Ogden hastily.

"Slytherins!" yelled Gaunt. "Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?"

"Mr. Gaunt, your daughter!" said Ogden in alarm, but Gaunt had already released Merope; she staggered away from him, back to her corner, massaging her neck and gulping for air.

"So!" said Gaunt triumphantly, as though he had just proved a complicated point beyond all possible dispute. "Don't you go talking to us as if we're dirt on your shoes! Generations of purebloods, wizards all — more than you can say, I don't doubt!"

And he spat on the floor at Ogdens feet. Morfin cackled again. Merope, huddled beside the window, her head bowed and her face hidden by her lank hair, said nothing.

"Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden doggedly, "I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter in hand. I am here because of Morfin, Morfin and the Muggle he accosted late last night. Our information" — he glanced down at his scroll of parchment — "is that Morfin performed a jinx or hex on the said Muggle, causing him to erupt in highly painful hives."

Morfin giggled.

"Be quiet, boy," snarled Gaunt in Parseltongue, and Morfin fell silent again.

"And so what if he did, then?" Gaunt said defiantly to Ogden, "I expect you've wiped the Muggle's filthy face clean for him, and his memory to boot—"

"That's hardly the point, is it, Mr. Gaunt?" said Ogden. "This was an unprovoked attack on a defenseless —"

"Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you," sneered Gaunt, and he spat on the floor again.

"This discussion is getting us nowhere," said Ogden firmly. "It is clear from your son's attitude that he feels no remorse for his actions." He glanced down at his scroll of parchment again. "Morfin will attend a hearing on the fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of a Muggle and causing harm and distress to that same Mugg —"

Ogden broke off. The jingling, clopping sounds of horses and loud, laughing voices were drifting in through the open window. Apparently the winding lane to the village passed very close to the copse where the house stood. Gaunt froze, listening, his eyes wide. Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the sounds, his expression hungry. Merope raised her head. Her face, Harry saw, was starkly white.

"My God, what an eyesore!" rang out a girl's voice, as clearly audible through the open window as if she had stood in the room beside them. "Couldn't your father have that hovel cleared away, Tom?"

"It's not ours," said a young man's voice. "Everything on the other side of the valley belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to an old tramp called Gaunt, and his children. The son's quite mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village —"

The girl laughed. The jingling, clopping noises were growing louder and louder. Morfin made to get out of his armchair. "Keep your seat," said his father warningly, in Parseltongue.

"Tom," said the girl's voice again, now so close they were clearly right beside the house, "I might be wrong — but has somebody nailed a snake to that door?"

"Good lord, you're right!" said the man's voice. "That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it, Cecilia, darling."

The jingling and clopping sounds were now growing faint again.

"Darling," whispered Morfin in Parseltongue, looking at his sister. "Darling, he called her. So he wouldn't have you anyway."

Merope was so white Harry felt sure she was going to faint.

"What's that?" said Gaunt sharply, also in Parseltongue, looking from his son to his daughter. "What did you say, Morfin?"

"She likes looking at that Muggle," said Morfin, a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked terrified. "Always in the garden when he passes, peering through the hedge at him, isn't she? And last night — "

Merope shook her head jerkily, imploringly, but Morfin went on ruthlessly, "Hanging out of the window waiting for him to ride home, wasn't she?"

"Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?" said Gaunt quietly.

All three of the Gaunts seemed to have forgotten Ogden, who was looking both bewildered and irritated at this renewed outbreak of incomprehensible hissing and rasping.

"Is it true?" said Gaunt in a deadly voice, advancing a step or two toward the terrified girl. "My daughter—pure-blooded descendant of Salazar Slytherin — hankering after a filthy, dirt-veined Muggle?"

Merope shook her head frantically, pressing herself into the wall, apparently unable to speak.

"But I got him, Father!" cackled Morfin. "I got him as he went by and he didn't look so pretty with hives all over him, did he, Merope?"

"You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!" roared Gaunt, losing control, and his hands closed around his daughter's throat.

Both Harry and Ogden yelled "No!" at the same time; Ogden raised his wand and cried, "Relaskio!"

Gaunt was thrown backward, away from his daughter; he tripped over a chair and fell flat on his back. With a roar of rage, Morfin leapt out of his chair and ran at Ogden, brandishing his bloody knife and firing hexes indiscriminately from his wand.

Ogden ran for his life. Dumbledore indicated that they ought to follow and Harry obeyed, Merope's screams echoing in his ears.

Ogden hurtled up the path and erupted onto the main lane, his arms over his head, where he collided with the glossy chestnut horse ridden by a very handsome, dark-haired young man. Both he and the pretty girl riding beside him on a gray horse roared with laughter at the sight of Ogden, who bounced off the horse's flank and set off again, his frock coat flying, covered from head to foot in dust, running pell-mell up the lane.

"I think that will do, Harry," said Dumbledore. He took Harry by the elbow and tugged. Next moment, they were both soaring weightlessly through darkness, until they landed squarely on their feet, back in Dumbledore's now twilight office.

"What happened to the girl in the cottage?" said Harry at once, as Dumbledore lit extra lamps with a flick of his wand. "Merope, or whatever her name was?"

"Oh, she survived," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk and indicating that Harry should sit down too. "Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage, and subsequently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees in addition to Ogden, received six months."

"Marvolo?" Harry repeated wonderingly.

"That's right," said Dumbledore, smiling in approval. "I am glad to see you're keeping up."

"That old man was — ?"

"Voldemort's grandfather, yes," said Dumbledore. "Marvolo, his son, Morfin, and his daughter, Merope, were the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient Wizarding family noted for a vein of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Lack of sense coupled with a great liking for grandeur meant that the family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a very nasty temper, a fantastic amount of arrogance and pride, and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter."

"So Merope," said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and staring at Dumbledore, "so Merope was . . . Sir, does that mean she was . . . Voldemort's mother?"

"It does," said Dumbledore. "And it so happens that we also had a glimpse of Voldemort's father. I wonder whether you noticed?"

"The Muggle Morfin attacked? The man on the horse?"

"Very good indeed," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Yes, that was Tom Riddle senior, the handsome Muggle who used to go riding past the Gaunt cottage and for whom Merope Gaunt cherished a secret, burning passion."

"And they ended up married?" Harry said in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love.

"I think you are forgetting," said Dumbledore, "that Merope was a witch. I do not believe that her magical powers appeared to their best advantage when she was being terrorized by her father. Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban, once she was alone and free for the first time in her life, then, I am sure, she was able to give full rein to her abilities and to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years."

"Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and fall in love with her instead?"

"The Imperius Curse?" Harry suggested. "Or a love potion?"

"Very good. Personally, I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter, Merope."

"But the villagers' shock was nothing to Marvolo's. He returned from Azkaban, expecting to find his daughter dutifully awaiting his return with a hot meal ready on his table. Instead, he found a clear inch of dust and her note of farewell, explaining what she had done."

"From all that I have been able to discover, he never mentioned her name or existence from that time forth. The shock of her desertion may have contributed to his early death — or perhaps he had simply never learned to feed himself. Azkaban had greatly weakened Marvolo, and he did not live to see Morfin return to the cottage."

"And Merope? She ... she died, didn't she? Wasn't Voldemort brought up in an orphanage?"

"Yes, indeed," said Dumbledore. "We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult to deduce what happened. You see, within a few months of their runaway marriage, Tom

Riddle reappeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew around the neighborhood that he was talking of being 'hoodwinked' and 'taken in.' What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchantment that had now lifted, though I daresay he did not dare use those precise words for fear of being thought insane. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle, pretending that she was going to have his baby, and that he had married her for this reason."

"But she did have his baby."

"But not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant."

"What went wrong?" asked Harry. "Why did the love potion stop working?"

"Again, this is guesswork," said Dumbledore, "but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son."

The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before.

"I think that will do for tonight, Harry," said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

He got to his feet, but did not leave.

"Sir ... is it important to know all this about Voldemort's past?"

"Very important, I think," said Dumbledore.

"And it... it's got something to do with the prophecy?"

"It has everything to do with the prophecy."

"Right," said Harry, a little confused, but reassured all the same.

He turned to go, then another question occurred to him, and he turned back again. "Sir, am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione everything you've told me?"

Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have proved themselves trust-worthy. But Harry, I am going to ask you to ask them not to repeat any of this to anybody else.

It would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets."

"No, sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night."

He turned away again, and was almost at the door when he saw it. Sitting on one of the little spindle-legged tables that supported so many frail-looking silver instruments, was an ugly gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

"Sir," said Harry, staring at it. "That ring—"

"Yes?" said Dumbledore.

"You were wearing it when we visited Professor Slughorn that night."

"So I was," Dumbledore agreed.

"But isn't it... sir, isn't it the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?"

Dumbledore bowed his head. "The very same."

"But how come — ? Have you always had it?"

"No, I acquired it very recently," said Dumbledore. "A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle's, in fact."

"That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?"

"Around that time, yes, Harry."

Harry hesitated. Dumbledore was smiling.

"Sir, how exactly — ?"

"Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Chapter 11: Hermione's helping hand

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had anticipated, but times in which to attempt to keep up with the vast amount of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons themselves had become more demanding than ever before. Harry barely understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat instructions once or twice. Incredibly, and to Hermione's increasing resentment, Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince.

Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. Harry frequently looked over at his classmates in the common room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he knew that they were really struggling to make spells work without saying incantations aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants than ever in Herbology, but at least they were still allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had so far been unable to find time to go and visit Hagrid. He had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed

him in the corridors or out in the grounds, he had mysteriously failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

"We've got to go and explain," said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid's huge empty chair at the staff table the following Saturday at breakfast.

"We've got Quidditch tryouts this morning!" said Ron. "And we're supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm from Flitwick! Anyway, explain what? How are we going to tell him we hated his stupid subject?"

"We didn't hate it!" said Hermione.

"Speak for yourself, I haven't forgotten the skrewts," said Ron darkly. "And I'm telling you now, we've had a narrow escape. You didn't hear him going on about his gormless brother — we'd have been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed."

"I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that they were better off without Grawp in their lives. "But trials might take all morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at confronting the first hurdle of his Captaincy. "I dunno why the team's this popular all of a sudden."

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not Quidditch that's popular, it's you! You've never been more interesting, and frankly, you've never been more fanciable."

Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right about Voldemort being back and that you really have fought him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, come on, can't you see why people are fascinated by you?"

Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"And you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable and a liar. You can still see the marks on the back of your hand where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway. ..."

"You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the Ministry, look," said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

"And it doesn't hurt that you've grown about a foot over the summer either," Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

"I'm tall," said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most people were receiving more post than usual; anxious parents were keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail since the start of term; his only regular correspondent was now dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very surprised, therefore, to see the snowy white Hedwig circling amongst all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical package landed in front of Ron, crushing beneath it his minuscule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

"Ha!" said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of Advanced Potion-Making, fresh from Flourish and Blotts.

"Oh good," said Hermione, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back."

"Are you mad?" said Harry. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out —"

He pulled the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, "Dijjindo!" The cover fell off. He did the same thing with the brand-new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, "Reparo!"

There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disapproving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her carrying that day's copy of the Daily Prophet. She unfolded it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione opened her paper.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermione. "And an arrest."

"Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange. "Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding conveyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. Mr. Shunpike, 21, was taken into custody late last night after a raid on his Clapham home. . ."

"Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years before. "No way!"

"He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell."

"It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping about their plans, would he?"

"It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to become Minister of Magic when he was trying to chat up those veela?"

"Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously."

"They probably want to look as though they're doing something," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know the Patil twins' parents want them to go home? And Eloise Midgen has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night."

"What!" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We've got Aurors, and all those extra protective spells, and we've got Dumbledore!"

"I don't think we've got him all the time," said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the Prophet. "Haven't you noticed? His seat's been empty as often as Hagrid's this past week."

Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster's chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to think of it, he had not seen Dumbledore since their private lesson a week ago.

"I think he's left the school to do something with the Order," said Hermione in a low voice. "I mean . . . it's all looking serious, isn't it?"

Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible incident the day before, when Hannah Abbott had been taken out of Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Remembering what Hermione had said about the Patil twins' parents wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were whispering together, looking distressed. What did surprise him was that when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron blinked at her, then returned the smile uncertainly. His walk instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, remembering that Ron had refrained from doing so after Malfoy had broken

Harry's nose; Hermione, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to find a place in the stands without wishing Ron good luck.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years who were nervously clutching a selection of the dreadful old school brooms, to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a large, wiry-haired boy Harry recognized immediately from the Hogwarts Express.

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry's hand. "Cormac McLaggen, Keeper."

"You didn't try out last year, did you?" asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would probably block all three goal hoops without even moving.

"I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials," said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. "Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet."

"Right," said Harry. "Well. . . if you wait over there ..." He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermione was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance pass over McLaggen's face and wondered whether McLaggen expected preferential treatment because they were both "old Sluggy's" favorites. Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all

applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. This was a good decision: the first ten was made up of first years, and it could not have been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to remain airborne for more than a few seconds, and he was so surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goal posts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, merely fell about giggling and clutching one another. Romilda Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands to heckle everyone else.

The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group were Hufflepuffs.

"If there's anyone else here who's not from Gryffindor," roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, "leave now, please!"

There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter.

After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one involving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken teeth, Harry had found himself three Chasers: Katie Bell, returned to the team after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflown all the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices,

Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the many complainers and was now enduring a similar battle with the rejected Beaters.

"That's my final decision and if you don't get out of the way of the Keepers I'll hex you," he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with them: Jimmy Peakes, a short but broad-chested third-year boy who had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry's head with a ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked weedy but aimed well. They now joined Katie, Demelza, and Ginny in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. Unfortunately, however, all the rejected players and a number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had joined the crowd by now, so that it was larger than ever. As each Keeper flew up to the goal hoops, the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves; Harry had hoped that winning their final match last term might have cured it, but apparently not: Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, however, he shot off in completely the wrong

direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinding his teeth.

Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry looked around, expecting to see Hermione, but it was Lavender Brown. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as the Captain he ought to show slightly more grit, and so turned to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in the cheers of the crowd with difficulty, Harry turned to McLaggen to tell him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his own. He stepped back hastily.

"His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had often admired in Uncle Vernon's. "She gave him an easy save."

"Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."

McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

"Give me another go."

"No," said Harry. "You've had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron's Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of my way."

He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed away, growling what sounded like threats to thin air.

Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

"Well done," he croaked. "You flew really well —"

"You did brilliantly, Ron!"

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, arm in arm with Parvati, a rather grumpy expression on her face. Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the rest of the team and headed off toward Hagrid's. A watery sun was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he hoped there would be some-thing to eat at Hagrid's.

"I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty," Ron was saying happily. "Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, had a bit of spin on it —"

"Yes, yes, you were magnificent," said Hermione, looking amused.

"I was better than that McLaggen anyway," said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. "Did you see him lumbering off in the wrong direction on his fifth? Looked like he'd been Confunded. ..."

To Harry's surprise, Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy describing each of his other penalties in loving detail.

The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid's cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their approach and turned his huge head toward them.

"Oh dear," said Hermione nervously. "He's still a bit scary, isn't he?"

"Come off it, you've ridden him, haven't you?" said Ron. Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, Buckbeak sank into a bow too.

"How are you?" Harry asked him in a low voice, moving forward to stroke the feathery head. "Missing him? But you're okay here with Hagrid, aren't you?"

"Oi!" said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. His enormous boarhound, Fang, was at his heels; Fang gave a booming bark and bounded forward.

"Git away from him! He'll have yer fingers — oh. It's yeh lot."

Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a split second, then turned and strode into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh dear!" said Hermione, looking stricken.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly. "Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!"

There was no sound from within.

"If you don't open the door, we'll blast it open!" Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Harry!" said Hermione, sounding shocked. "You can't possibly —"

"Yeah, I can!" said Harry. "Stand back —"

But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid, glowering down at him and looking, despite the flowery apron, positively alarming.

"I'm a teacher!" he roared at Harry. "A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!"

"I'm sorry, sir" said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have yeh called me 'sir'?"

"Since when have you called me 'Potter'?"

"Oh, very clever," growled Hagrid. "Very amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? All righ', come in then, yeh ungrateful little . . ."

Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

"Well?" said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head immediately upon Harry's knee and drooling all over his robes. "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?"

"No," said Harry at once. "We wanted to see you."

"We've missed you!" said Hermione tremulously.

"Missed me, have yeh?" snorted Hagrid. "Yeah. Righ'."

He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down three bucket-sized mugs of mahogany-brown tea in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid's cooking, and took one at once.

"Hagrid," said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that suggested that each tuber had done him a great personal wrong, "we really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know." Hagrid gave another great snort. Harry rather thought some bo-geys landed on the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful that they were not staying for dinner.

"We did!" said Hermione. "But none of us could fit it into our schedules!"

"Yeah. Righ'," said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat and hurried around the table away from the large barrel standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

"What are they, Hagrid?" asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake all the same.

"Jus' giant grubs," said Hagrid.

"And they grow into ... ?" said Ron, looking apprehensive.

"They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog."

And without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. "What is it?"

"It's. . . him . . ." gulped Hagrid, his beetle-black eyes stream-ing as he mopped his face with his apron. "It's . . . Aragog. ... I think he's dyin'. . . He got ill over the summer an' he's not gettin' better.... I don' know what I'll do if he ... if he ... We've bin tergether so long. ..."

Hermione patted Hagrid's shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had known Hagrid to present a vicious baby dragon with a teddy bear, seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, but this was perhaps the most incomprehensible of all his monster fancies: the gigantic talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had only narrowly escaped four years previously.

"Is there — is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, ignoring Ron's frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

"I don' think there is, Hermione," choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. "See, the rest o' the tribe ... Aragog's family . . . they're gettin' a bit funny now he's ill... bit restive ..."

"Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them," said Ron in an undertone.

"... I don' reckon it'd be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo'," Hagrid finished, blowing his nose hard on his apron and looking up. "But thanks fer offerin', Hermione. ... It means a lot."

After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to go and feed giant grubs to a murderous, gargantuan spider, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and became his usual self once more.

"Ar, I always knew yeh'd find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables," he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. "Even if yeh applied fer Time-Turners —"

"We couldn't have done," said Hermione. "We smashed the entire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there last summer. It was in the Daily Prophet."

"Ar, well then," said Hagrid. "There's no way yeh could've done it. ... I'm sorry I've bin — yeh know — I've jus' bin worried about Aragog ... an I did wonder whether, if Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin' yeh —"

At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for Hagrid a few times, was a dreadful teacher, with the result that by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

"I'm starving," said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted grounds; he had abandoned the rock cake after an ominous cracking noise from one of his back teeth. "And I've got that detention with Snape tonight, I haven't got much time for dinner."

As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen entering the Great Hall. It took him two attempts to get through the doors; he ricocheted off the frame on the first attempt. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

"What?" said Hermione defensively.

"If you ask me," said Harry quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting."

Hermione blushed.

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Anyway, he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team."

"No," said Harry. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dishonest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?"

"Oh, be quiet," she snapped, as he smirked.

"What are you two doing?" demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

"Nothing," said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach ache with hunger, but they had barely taken three steps toward the Gryffindor table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed genially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and puffing out his enormous belly, "I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars, I've got McLaggen coming and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin — I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large

chain of apothecaries — and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too."

Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not so much as look at him.

"I can't come, Professor," said Harry at once. "I've got a detention with Professor Snape."

"Oh dear!" said Slughorn, his face falling comically. "Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I'll just have to have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I'm sure I'll be able to persuade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!" He bustled away out of the Hall.

"He's got no chance of persuading Snape," said Harry, the moment Slughorn was out of earshot. "This detention's already been postponed once; Snape did it for Dumbledore, but he won't do it for anyone else."

"Oh, I wish you could come, I don't want to go on my own!" said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking about McLaggen.

"I doubt you'll be alone, Ginny'll probably be invited," snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored by Slughorn.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had finished dinner by now, but

they managed to find a free table and sat down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn, folded his arms and frowned at the ceiling. Hermione reached out for a copy of the Evening Prophet, which somebody had left abandoned on a chair.

"Anything new?" said Harry.

"Not really. . ." Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. "Oh, look, your dad's in here, Ron — he's all right!" she added quickly, for Ron had looked around in alarm. "It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. 'This second search of the Death Eaters residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off.'"

"Yeah, mine!" said Harry. "I told him at Kings Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him —"

"But how can he have done, Harry?" said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. "We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?"

"Were you?" said Harry, taken aback. "I wasn't!"

"Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late. Well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the entrance hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!"

Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone."

"All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach."

Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy — ?"

"Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!" said Harry, firing up.

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."

He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you."

"From Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

"No ... from Professor Snape," said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention — er — no matter how many party invitations you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and — and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves."

"Right," said Harry grimly. "Thanks a lot, Demelza."

Chapter 12: Silver and opals

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing?

Harry caught sight of the headmaster only twice over the next few weeks. He rarely appeared at meals anymore, and Harry was sure Hermione was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was supposed to be giving Harry? Dumbledore had said that the lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly abandoned.

Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would still be allowed, given the increasingly tight security measures around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle grounds for a few hours.

Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by reading his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. He did not usually lie in bed reading his textbooks; that sort of behavior, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who was simply weird that way. Harry felt, however, that the Half-Blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book, the more he realized how much was in there, not only the handy hints and shortcuts on potions that was earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative little

jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins, which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow alarmingly fast (he had tried this on Crabbe in the corridor, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch); and, perhaps most useful of all, Muffliato, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that lengthy conversations could be held in class with out being overheard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression throughout and refused to talk at all if Harry had used the Muffliato spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell that seemed to have caused the Prince some trouble. There were many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

Levicorpus (nvbl)

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows, and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters in brackets. Nvbl . . . that had to mean "nonverbal." Harry rather doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with nonverbal spells, something Snape had been quick to comment on in every D.A.D.A. class.

On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said Levicorpus! inside his head. "Aaaaaaaargh!"

There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: Everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry sent Advanced Potion-Making flying in panic; Ron was dangling upside down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

"Sorry!" yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter, and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having fallen out of Bed. "Hang on — I'll let you down —"

He groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic, trying to find the right page; at last he located it and deciphered the cramped word underneath the spell: Praying that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought Liberacorpus! with all his might. There was another flash of light, and Ron fell in a heap onto his mattress.

"Sorry," repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

"Tomorrow," said Ron in a muffled voice, "I'd rather you set the alarm clock."

By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs. Weasleys hand-knitted sweaters and carrying cloaks, scarves, and gloves, Ron's shock had subsided and he had decided that Harry's new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with the story as they sat down for breakfast.

"... and then there was another flash, of light and I landed on the bed again!" Ron grinned, helping himself to sausages.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Harry.

"Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that potion book of yours?" she asked.

Harry frowned at her.

"Always jump to the worst conclusion, don't you?"

"Was it?"

"Well. . . yeah, it was, but so what?"

"So you just decided to try out an unknown, handwritten incantation and see what would happen?"

"Why does it matter if it's handwritten?" said Harry, preferring not to answer the rest of the question.

"Because it's probably not Ministry of Magic approved," said Hermione. "And also," she added, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, "because I'm starting to think this Prince character was a bit dodgy."

Both Harry and Ron shouted her down at once.

"It was a laugh!" said Ron, upending a ketchup bottle over his sausages. "Just a laugh, Hermione, that's all!"

"Dangling people upside down by the ankle?" said Hermi-one. "Who puts their time and energy into making up spells like that?"

"Fred and George," said Ron, shrugging, "it's their kind of thing. And, er—"

"My dad," said Harry. He had only just remembered.

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"My dad used this spell," said Harry. "I — Lupin told me."

This last part was not true; in fact, Harry had seen his father use the spell on Snape, but he had never told Ron and Hermione about that particular

excursion into the Pensieve. Now, however, a wonderful possibility occurred to him. Could the Half-Blood Prince possibly be — ?

"Maybe your dad did use it, Harry," said Hermione, "but he's not the only one. We've seen a whole bunch of people use it, in case you've forgotten. Dangling people in the air. Making them float along, asleep, helpless."

Harry stared at her. With a sinking feeling, he too remembered the behavior of the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup. Ron came to his aid.

"That was different," he said robustly. "They were abusing it. Harry and his dad were just having a laugh. You don't like the Prince, Hermione," he added, pointing a sausage at her sternly, "because he's better than you at Potions —"

"It's got nothing to do with that!" said Hermione, her cheeks reddening. "I just think it's very irresponsible to start performing spells when you don't even know what they're for, and stop talking about 'the Prince' as if it's his title, I bet it's just a stupid nickname, and it doesn't seem as though he was a very nice person to me!"

"I don't see where you get that from," said Harry heatedly. "If he'd been a budding Death Eater he wouldn't have been boasting about being 'half-blood,' would he?"

Even as he said it, Harry remembered that his father had been pure-blood, but he pushed the thought out of his mind; he would worry about that later.

"The Death Eaters can't all be pure-blood, there aren't enough pure-blood wizards left," said Hermione stubbornly. "I expect most of them are half-bloods pretending to be pure. It's only Muggle-borns they hate, they'd be quite happy to let you and Ron join up."

"There is no way they'd let me be a Death Eater!" said Ron indignantly, a bit of sausage flying off the fork he was now brandishing at Hermione and hitting Ernie Macmillan on the head. "My whole family are blood traitors! That's as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!"

"And they'd love to have me," said Harry sarcastically. "We'd be best pals if they didn't keep trying to do me in."

This made Ron laugh; even Hermione gave a grudging smile, and a distraction arrived in the shape of Ginny.

"Hey, Harry, I'm supposed to give you this."

It was a scroll of parchment with Harry's name written upon it in familiar thin, slanting writing.

"Thanks, Ginny. . . It's Dumbledore's next lesson!" Harry told Ron and Hermione, pulling open the parchment and quickly reading its contents.

"Monday evening!" He felt suddenly light and happy. "Want to join us in Hogsmeade, Ginny?" he asked.

"I'm going with Dean — might see you there," she replied, waving at them as she left.

Filch was standing at the oak front doors as usual, checking off the names of people who had permission to go into Hogsmeade. The process took even longer than normal as Filch was triple-checking everybody with his Secrecy Sensor.

"What does it matter if we're smuggling Dark stuff OUT?" demanded Ron, eyeing the long thin Secrecy Sensor with apprehension. "Surely you ought to be checking what we bring back IN?"

His cheek earned him a few extra jabs with the Sensor, and he was still wincing as they stepped out into the wind and sleet.

The walk into Hogsmeade was not enjoyable. Harry wrapped his scarf over his lower face; the exposed part soon felt both raw and numb. The road to the village was full of students bent double against the bitter wind. More than once Harry wondered whether they might not have had a better time in the warm common room, and when they finally reached Hogsmeade and saw that Zonko's Joke Shop had been boarded up, Harry took it as confirmation that this trip was not destined to be fun. Ron pointed, with a

thickly gloved hand, toward Honeydukes, which was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop.

"Thank God," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. "Let's stay here all afternoon."

"Harry, m'boy!" said a booming voice from behind them.

"Oh no," muttered Harry. The three of them turned to see Professor Slughorn, who was wearing an enormous furry hat and an overcoat with matching fur collar, clutching a large bag of crystalized pineapple, and occupying at least a quarter of the shop.

"Harry, that's three of my little suppers you've missed now!" said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. "It won't do, m'boy, I'm determined to have you! Miss Granger loves them, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hermione helplessly, "they're really —"

"So why don't you come along, Harry?" demanded Slughorn.

"Well, I've had Quidditch practice, Professor," said Harry, who had indeed been scheduling practices every time Slughorn had sent him a little, violet ribbon-adorned invitation. This strategy meant that Ron was not left out, and they usually had a laugh with Ginny, imagining Hermione shut up with McLaggen and Zabini.

"Well, I certainly expect you to win your first match after all the hard work!" said Slughorn. "But a little recreation never hurt any body. Now, how about Monday night, you can't possibly want to practice in this weather...."

"I can't, Professor, I've got — er — an appointment with Professor Dumbledore that evening."

"Unlucky again!" cried Slughorn dramatically. "Ah, well . . . you can't evade me forever, Harry!"

And with a regal wave, he waddled out of the shop, taking as little notice of Ron as though he had been a display of Cockroach Clusters.

"I can't believe you've wriggled out of another one," said Hermione, shaking her head. "They're not that bad, you know. . . They're even quite fun sometimes. . . ." But then she caught sight of Ron's expression. "Oh, look — they've got deluxe sugar quills — those would last hours!"

Glad that Hermione had changed the subject, Harry showed much more interest in the new extra-large sugar quills than he would normally have done, but Ron continued to look moody and merely shrugged when Hermione asked him where he wanted to go next.

"Let's go to the Three Broomsticks," said Harry. "It'll be warm."

They bundled their scarves back over their faces and left the sweetshop. The bitter wind was like knives on their faces after the sugary warmth of Honeydukes. The street was not very busy; nobody was lingering to chat, just hurrying toward their destinations. The exceptions were two men a little ahead of them, standing just outside the Three Broomsticks. One was very tall and thin; squinting through his rain-washed glasses Harry recognized the barman who worked in the other Hogsmeade pub, the Hog's Head. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew closer, the barman drew his cloak more tightly around his neck and walked away, leaving the shorter man to fumble with something in his arms. They were barely feet from him when Harry realized who the man was.

"Mundungus!"

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open, releasing what looked like the entire contents of a junk shop window.

"Oh, 'ello, 'Arry," said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most unconvincing stab at airiness. "Well, don't let me keep ya."

And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to be gone.

"Are you selling this stuff?" asked Harry, watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

"Oh, well, gotta scrape a living," said Mundungus. "Gimme that!"

Ron had stooped down and picked up something silver.

"Hang on," Ron said slowly. "This looks familiar —"

"Thank you!" said Mundungus, snatching the goblet out of Ron's hand and stuffing it back into the case. "Well, I'll see you all _ OUCH!"

Harry had pinned Mundungus against the wall of the pub by the throat. Holding him fast with one hand, he pulled out his wand.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione.

"You took that from Sinus's house," said Harry, who was almost nose to nose with Mundungus and was breathing in an unpleasant smell of old tobacco and spirits. "That had the Black family crest on it."

"I — no — what — ?" spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple.

"What did you do, go back the night he died and strip the place?" snarled Harry.

"I — no — "

"Give it to me!"

"Harry, you mustn't!" shrieked Hermione, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus's throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized his fallen case, then — CRACK— he Disapparated.

Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone.

"COME BACK, YOU THIEVING — !"

"There's no point, Harry." Tonks had appeared out of nowhere, her mousy hair wet with sleet.

"Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There's no point yelling."

"He's nicked Sirius's stuff! Nicked it!"

"Yes, but still," said Tonks, who seemed perfectly untroubled by this piece of information. "You should get out of the cold."

She watched them go through the door of the Three Broom-sticks. The moment he was inside, Harry burst out, "He was nicking Sirius's stuff!"

"I know, Harry, but please don't shout, people are staring," whispered Hermione. "Go and sit down, I'll get you a drink."

Harry was still fuming when Hermione returned to their table a few minutes later holding three bottles of butterbeer.

"Can't the Order control Mundungus?" Harry demanded of the other two in a furious whisper. "Can't they at least stop him stealing everything that's not fixed down when he's at headquarters?"

"Shh!" said Hermione desperately, looking around to make sure nobody was listening; there were a couple of warlocks sitting close by who were staring at Harry with great interest, and Zabini was lolling against a pillar not far away. "Harry, I'd be annoyed too, I know it's your things he's stealing—"

Harry gagged on his butterbeer; he had momentarily forgotten that he owned number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Yeah, it's my stuff!" he said. "No wonder he wasn't pleased to see me! Well, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what's going on, he's the only one who scares Mundungus."

"Good idea," whispered Hermione, clearly pleased that Harry was calming down. "Ron, what are you staring at?"

"Nothing," said Ron, hastily looking away from the bar, but Harry knew he was trying to catch the eye of the curvy and attractive bar-maid, Madam Rosmerta, for whom he had long nursed a soft spot.

"I expect 'nothing's' in the back getting more firewhisky," said Hermione waspishly.

Ron ignored this jibe, sipping his drink in what he evidently considered to be a dignified silence. Harry was thinking about Sirius, and how he had hated those silver goblets anyway. Hermione drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes flickering between Ron and the bar. The moment Harry drained the last drops in his bottle she said, "Shall we call it a day and go back to school, then?"

The other two nodded; it had not been a fun trip and the weather was getting worse the longer they stayed. Once again they drew their cloaks tightly around them, rearranged their scarves, pulled on their gloves, then followed Katie Bell and a friend out of the pub and back up the High Street. Harry's thoughts strayed to Ginny as they trudged up the road to Hogwarts through the frozen slush. They had not met up with her, undoubtedly, thought Harry, because she and Dean were cozily closeted in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, that haunt of happy couples. Scowling, he bowed his head against the swirling sleet and trudged on.

It was a little while before Harry became aware that the voices of Katie Bell and her friend, which were being carried back to him on the wind, had become shriller and louder. Harry squinted at their indistinct figures. The

two girls were having an argument about something Katie was holding in her hand. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Harry heard Katie say.

They rounded a corner in the lane, sleet coming thick and fast, blurring Harry's glasses. Just as he raised a gloved hand to wipe them, Leanne made to grab hold of the package Katie was holding; Katie tugged it back and the package fell to the ground.

At once, Katie rose into the air, not as Ron had done, suspended comically by the ankle, but gracefully, her arms outstretched, as though she was about to fly. Yet there was something wrong, something eerie. . . . Her hair was whipped around her by the fierce wind, but her eyes were closed and her face was quite empty of expression. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne had all halted in their tracks, watching.

Then, six feet above the ground, Katie let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open but whatever she could see, or whatever she was feeling, was clearly causing her terrible anguish. She screamed and screamed; Leanne started to scream too and seized Katie's ankles, trying to tug her back to the ground. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rushed forward to help, but even as they grabbed Katie's legs, she fell on top of them; Harry and Ron managed to catch her but she was writhing so much they could hardly hold her. Instead they lowered her to the ground where she thrashed and screamed, apparently unable to recognize any of them.

Harry looked around; the landscape seemed deserted.

"Stay there!" he shouted at the others over the howling wind. "I'm going for help!"

He began to sprint toward the school; he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think what had caused it; he hurtled around a bend in the lane and collided with what seemed to be an enormous bear on its hind legs.

"Hagrid!" he panted, disentangling himself from the hedgerow into which he had fallen.

"Harry!" said Hagrid, who had sleet trapped in his eyebrows and beard, and was wearing his great, shaggy beaverskin coat. "Jus' bin visitin' Grawp, he's comin' on so well yeh wouldn' —"

"Hagrid, someone's hurt back there, or cursed, or something —"

"Wha ?" said Hagrid, bending lower to hear what Harry was saying over the raging wind.

"Someone's been cursed!" bellowed Harry.

"Cursed? Who's bin cursed — not Ron? Hermione?"

"No, it's not them, it's Katie Bell — this way . . ."

Together they ran back along the lane. It took them no time to find the little group of people around Katie, who was still writhing and screaming on the ground; Ron, Hermione, and Leanne were all trying to quiet her.

"Get back!" shouted Hagrid. "Lemme see her!"

"Something's happened to her!" sobbed Leanne. "I don't know what —"

Hagrid stared at Katie for a second, then without a word, bent down, scooped her into his arms, and ran off toward the castle with her. Within seconds, Katie's piercing screams had died away and the only sound was the roar of the wind.

Hermione hurried over to Katie's wailing friend and put an arm around her.

"It's Leanne, isn't it?"

The girl nodded.

"Did it just happen all of a sudden, or — ?"

"It was when that package tore," sobbed Leanne, pointing at the now sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which had split open to reveal a greenish glitter. Ron bent down, his hand out-stretched, but Harry seized his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't touch it!"

He crouched down. An ornate opal necklace was visible, poking out of the paper.

"I've seen that before," said Harry, staring at the thing. "It was on display in Borgin and Burkes ages ago. The label said it was cursed. Katie must have touched it." He looked up at Leanne, who had started to shake uncontrollably. "How did Katie get hold of this?"

"Well, that's why we were arguing. She came back from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was a surprise for somebody at Hogwarts and she had to deliver it. She looked all funny when she said it. ... Oh no, oh no, I bet she'd been Imperiused and I didn't realize!"

Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

"She didn't say who'd given it to her, Leanne?"

"No . . . she wouldn't tell me . . . and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn't listen and . . . and then I tried to grab it from her . . . and — and —"

Leanne let out a wail of despair.

"We'd better get up to school," said Hermione, her arm still around Leanne. "We'll be able to find out how she is. Come on. . . ."

Harry hesitated for a moment, then pulled his scarf from around his face and, ignoring Ron's gasp, carefully covered the necklace in it and picked it up.

"We'll need to show this to Madam Pomfrey," he said.

As they followed Hermione and Leanne up the road, Harry was thinking furiously. They had just entered the grounds when he spoke, unable to keep his thoughts to himself any longer.

"Malfoy knows about this necklace. It was in a case at Borgin and Burkes four years ago, I saw him having a good look at it while I was hiding from him and his dad. This is what he was buying that day when we followed him! He remembered it and he went back for it!" ,

"I — I dunno, Harry," said Ron hesitantly. "Loads of people go to Borgin and Burkes . . . and didn't that girl say Katie got it in the girls' bathroom?"

"She said she came back from the bathroom with it, she didn't necessarily get it in the bathroom itself—"

"McGonagall!" said Ron warningly.

Harry looked up. Sure enough, Professor McGonagall was hurrying down the stone steps through swirling sleet to meet them.

"Hagrid says you four saw what happened to Katie Bell — upstairs to my office at once, please! What's that you're holding, Potter?"

"It's the thing she touched," said Harry.

"Good lord," said Professor McGonagall, looking alarmed as she took the necklace from Harry. "No, no, Filch, they're with me!" she added hastily, as Filch came shuffling eagerly across the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor aloft. "Take this necklace to Professor Snape at once, but be sure not to touch it, keep it wrapped in the scarf!"

Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall upstairs and into her office. The sleet-spattered windows were rattling in their frames, and the room was chilly despite the fire crackling in the grate. Professor McGonagall closed the door and swept around her desk to face Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the still sobbing Leanne.

"Well?" she said sharply. "What happened?"

Haltingly, and with many pauses while she attempted to control her crying, Leanne told Professor McGonagall how Katie had gone to the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks and returned holding the unmarked package, how Katie had seemed a little odd, and how they had argued about the advisability of agreeing to deliver unknown objects, the argument culminating in the tussle over the parcel, which tore open. At this point, Leanne was so overcome, there was no getting another word out of her.

"All right," said Professor McGonagall, not unkindly, "go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for shock."

When she had left the room, Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What happened when Katie touched the necklace?"

"She rose up in the air," said Harry, before either Ron or Hermione could speak, "and then began to scream, and collapsed. Professor, can I see Professor Dumbledore, please?"

"The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, looking surprised.

"Away?" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes, Potter, away!" said Professor McGonagall tartly. "But anything you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I'm sure!"

For a split second, Harry hesitated. Professor McGonagall did not invite confidences; Dumbledore, though in many ways more intimidating, still seemed less likely to scorn a theory, however wild. This was a life-and-death matter, though, and no moment to worry about being laughed at.

"I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor."

On one side of him, Ron rubbed his nose in apparent embarrassment; on the other, Hermione shuffled her feet as though quite keen to put a bit of distance between herself and Harry.

"That is a very serious accusation, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, after a shocked pause. "Do you have any proof?"

"No," said Harry, "but..." and he told her about following Malfoy to Borgin and Burkes and the conversation they had over-heard between him and Mr. Borgin.

When he had finished speaking, Professor McGonagall looked slightly confused.

"Malfoy took something to Borgin and Burkes for repair?"

"No, Professor, he just wanted Borgin to tell him how to mend something, he didn't have it with him. But that's not the point, the thing is that he bought something at the same time, and I think it was that necklace —"

"You saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?"

"No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him —"

"But Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no —"

"Because he didn't want to touch it, obviously!" said Harry angrily.

"What he actually said was, 'How would I look carrying that down the street?'" said Hermione.

"Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace," interjected Ron.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione despairingly, "it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn't have to touch it, and quite easy to hide inside a cloak, so nobody would see it! I think whatever he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it down the street — and in any case," she pressed on loudly, before Harry could interrupt, "I asked Borgin about the necklace, don't you remember? When I went in to try and find out what Malfoy had asked him to keep, I saw it there. And Borgin just told me the price, he didn't say it was already sold or anything —"

"Well, you were being really obvious, he realized what you were up to within about five seconds, of course he wasn't going to tell you — anyway, Malfoy could've sent off for it since —"

"That's enough!" said Professor McGonagall, as Hermione opened her mouth to retort, looking furious. "Potter, I appreciate you telling me this, but we cannot point the finger of blame at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this necklace might have been purchased. The same is probably true of hundreds of people —"

"— that's what I said —" muttered Ron.

"— and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe that necklace can possibly have entered this school without our knowledge —"

"But —"

"— and what is more," said Professor McGonagall, with an air of awful finality, "Mr. Malfoy was not in Hogsmeade today."

Harry gaped at her, deflating.

"How do you know, Professor?"

"Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter," she said as she marched past them, "but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all."

She held open her office door. They had no choice but to file past her without another word.

Harry was angry with the other two for siding with McGonagall; nevertheless, he felt compelled to join in once they started discussing what had happened.

"So who do you reckon Katie was supposed to give the necklace to?" asked Ron, as they climbed the stairs to the common room.

"Goodness only knows," said Hermione. "But whoever it was has had a narrow escape. No one could have opened that package without touching the necklace."

"It could've been meant for loads of people," said Harry. "Dumbledore — the Death Eaters would love to get rid of him, he must be one of their top targets. Or Slughorn — Dumbledore reckons Voldemort really wanted him and they can't be pleased that he's sided with Dumbledore. Or —"

"Or you," said Hermione, looking troubled.

"Couldn't have been," said Harry, "or Katie would've just turned around in the lane and given it to me, wouldn't she? I was behind her all the way out of the Three Broomsticks. It would have made much more sense to deliver the parcel outside Hogwarts, what with Filch searching everyone who goes in and out. I wonder why Malfoy told her to take it into the castle?"

"Harry, Malfoy wasn't in Hogsmeade!" said Hermione, actually stamping her foot in frustration.

"He must have used an accomplice, then," said Harry. "Crabbe or Goyle — or, come to think of it, another Death Eater, he'll have loads better cronies than Crabbe and Goyle now he's joined up —"

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that plainly said There's no point arguing with him.

"Dilligrout," said Hermione firmly as they reached the Fat Lady.

The portrait swung open to admit them to the common room. It was quite full and smelled of damp clothing; many people seemed to have returned from Hogsmeade early because of the bad weather. There was no buzz of fear or speculation, however: Clearly, the news of Katie's fate had not yet spread.

"It wasn't a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it," said Ron, casually turfing a first year out of one of the good armchairs by the fire so that he could sit down. "The curse didn't even make it into the castle. Not what you'd call foolproof."

"You're right," said Hermione, prodding Ron out of the chair with her foot and offering it to the first year again. "It wasn't very well thought-out at all."

"But since when has Malfoy been one of the world's great thinkers?" asked Harry.

Neither Ron nor Hermione answered him.

Chapter 13: The Secret Riddle

Katie was removed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries the following day, by which time the news that she had been cursed had spread all over the school, though the details were confused and nobody other than Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne seemed to know that Katie herself had not been the intended target.

"Oh, and Malfoy knows, of course," said Harry to Ron and Hermione, who continued their new policy of feigning deafness whenever Harry mentioned his Malfoy-Is-a-Death-Eater theory.

Harry had wondered whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's lesson, but having had no word to the contrary, he presented himself outside Dumbledore's office at eight o'clock, knocked, and was told to enter. There sat Dumbledore looking unusually tired; his hand was as black and burned as ever, but he smiled when he gestured to Harry to sit down. The Pensieve was sitting on the desk again, casting silvery specks of light over the ceiling.

"You have had a busy time while I have been away," Dumbledore said. "I believe you witnessed Katie's accident."

"Yes, sir. How is she?"

"Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible amount of skin; there was a

tiny hole in her glove. Had she put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Luckily Professor Snape was able to do enough to prevent a rapid spread of the curse —"

"Why him?" asked Harry quickly. "Why not Madam Pomfrey?"

"Impertinent," said a soft voice from one of the portraits on the wall, and Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great-grandfather, raised his head from his arms where he had appeared to be sleeping. "I would not have permitted a student to question the way Hogwarts operated in my day."

"Yes, thank you, Phineas," said Dumbledore quellingly. "Professor Snape knows much more about the Dark Arts than Madam Pomfrey, Harry. Anyway, the St. Mungo's staff are sending me hourly reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time."

"Where were you this weekend, sir?" Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he might be pushing his luck, a feeling apparently shared by Phineas Nigellus, who hissed softly.

"I would rather not say just now," said Dumbledore. "However, I shall tell you in due course."

"You will?" said Harry, startled.

"Yes, I expect so," said Dumbledore, withdrawing a fresh bottle of silver memories from inside his robes and uncorking it with a prod of his wand.

"Sir," said Harry tentatively, "I met Mundungus in Hogsmeade."

"Ah yes, I am already aware that Mundungus has been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt," said Dumbledore, frowning a little. "He has gone to ground since you accosted him outside the Three Broomsticks; I rather think he dreads facing me. However, rest assured that he will not be making away with any more of Sirius's old possessions."

"That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black heirlooms?" said Phineas Nigellus, incensed; and he stalked out of his frame, undoubtedly to visit his portrait in number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Professor," said Harry, after a short pause, "did Professor McGonagall tell you what I told her after Katie got hurt? About Draco Malfoy?"

"She told me of your suspicions, yes," said Dumbledore.

"And do you — ?"

"I shall take all appropriate measures to investigate anyone who might have had a hand in Katie's accident," said Dumbledore. "But what concerns me now, Harry, is our lesson."

Harry felt slightly resentful at this: If their lessons were so very important, why had there been such a long gap between the first and second? However, he said no more about Draco Malfoy, but watched as Dumbledore poured

the fresh memories into the Pensieve and began swirling the stone basin once more between his long-fingered hands.

"You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort's beginnings at the point where the handsome Muggle, Tom Riddle, had abandoned his witch wife, Merope, and returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day become Lord Voldemort."

"How do you know she was in London, sir?"

"Because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke," said Dumbledore, "who, by an odd coincidence, helped find the very shop whence came the necklace we have just been discussing."

He swilled the contents of the Pensieve as Harry had seen him swill them before, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold. Up out of the swirling, silvery mass rose a little old man revolving slowly in the Pensieve, silver as a ghost but much more solid, with a thatch of hair that completely covered his eyes.

"Yes, we acquired it in curious circumstances. It was brought in by a young witch just before Christmas, oh, many years ago now. She said she needed the gold badly, well, that much was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along . . . Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin's. Well, we hear that sort of story all the time, 'Oh, this was Merlin's, this was, his favorite teapot,' but when I looked at it, it had his

mark all right, and a few simple spells were enough to tell me the truth. Of course, that made it near enough priceless. She didn't seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. Best bargain we ever made!"

Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memory from whence he had come.

"He only gave her ten Galleons?" said Harry indignantly.

"Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity," said Dumbledore. "So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, Merope was alone in London and in desperate need of gold, desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo's treasured family heirlooms."

"But she could do magic!" said Harry impatiently. "She could have got food and everything for herself by magic, couldn't she?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore, "perhaps she could. But it is my belief—I am guessing again, but I am sure I am right — that when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life."

"She wouldn't even stay alive for her son?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry quickly, "but she had a choice, didn't she, not like my mother —"

"Your mother had a choice too," said Dumbledore gently. "Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage. And now, if you will stand ..."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, as Dumbledore joined him at the front of the desk.

"This time," said Dumbledore, "we are going to enter my memory. I think you will find it both rich in detail and satisfyingly accurate. After you, Harry ..."

Harry bent over the Pensieve; his face broke the cool surface of the memory and then he was falling through darkness again. . . . Seconds later, his feet hit firm ground; he opened his eyes and found that he and Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street.

"There I am," said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart.

This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing.

"Nice suit, sir," said Harry, before he could stop himself, but Dumbledore merely chuckled as they followed his younger self a short distance, finally passing through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron.

"Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?"

"Oh," said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. "Um. . . just a mo' . . . MRS. COLE!" she bellowed over her shoulder.

Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore. "Come in, she's on 'er way."

Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry and the older Dumbledore

followed. Before the front door had closed behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying toward them. She had a sharp-featured face that appeared more anxious than unkind, and she was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked toward Dumbledore.

". . . and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley's oozing all over his sheets — chicken pox on top of everything else," she said to nobody in particular, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as if a giraffe had just crossed her threshold.

"Good afternoon," said Dumbledore, holding out his hand. Mrs. Cole simply gaped.

"My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today."

Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly, "Oh yes. Well — well then — you'd better come into my room. Yes."

She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture was old and mismatched. She invited Dumbledore to sit on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously.

"I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future," said Dumbledore.

"Are you family?" asked Mrs. Cole.

"No, I am a teacher," said Dumbledore. "I have come to offer Tom a place at my school."

"What school's this, then?"

"It is called Hogwarts," said Dumbledore.

"And how come you're interested in Tom?"

"We believe he has qualities we are looking for."

"You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have done? He's never been entered for one."

"Well, his name has been down for our school since birth —"

"Who registered him? His parents?"

There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too, for Harry now saw him slip his wand out of the pocket of his velvet suit, at the same time picking up a piece of perfectly blank paper from Mrs. Cole's desktop.

"Here," said Dumbledore, waving his wand once as he passed her the piece of paper, "I think this will make everything clear."

Mrs. Cole's eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank paper for a moment.

"That seems perfectly in order," she said placidly, handing it back. Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses that had certainly not been present a few seconds before.

"Er — may I offer you a glass of gin?" she said in an extra-refined voice.

"Thank you very much," said Dumbledore, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she drained her own glass in one gulp. Smacking her lips frankly, she smiled at Dumbledore for the first time, and he didn't hesitate to press his advantage.

"I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle's history? I think he was born here in the orphanage?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Cole, helping herself to more gin. "I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she

wasn't the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour."

Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

"Did she say anything before she died?" asked Dumbledore. "Anything about the boy's father, for instance?"

"Now, as it happens, she did," said Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand and an eager audience for her story. "I remember she said to me, 'I hope he looks like his papa,' and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty — and then she told me he was to be named Tom, for his father, and Marvolo, for her father — yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus — and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

"Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since."

Mrs. Cole helped herself, almost absentmindedly, to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared high on her cheekbones. Then she said, "He's a funny boy."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I thought he might be."

"He was a funny baby too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was. . . odd."

"Odd in what way?" asked Dumbledore gently.

"Well, he —"

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot Dumbledore over her gin glass.

"He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?"

"Definitely," said Dumbledore.

"And nothing I say can change that?"

"Nothing," said Dumbledore.

"You'll be taking him away, whatever?"

"Whatever," repeated Dumbledore gravely.

She squinted at him as though deciding whether or not to trust him. Apparently she decided she could, because she said in a sudden rush, "He scares the other children."

"You mean he is a bully?" asked Dumbledore.

"I think he must be," said Mrs. Cole, frowning slightly, "but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents. . . . Nasty things ..."

Dumbledore did not press her, though Harry could tell that he was interested. She took yet another gulp of gin and her rosy cheeks grew rosier still.

"Billy Stubbs's rabbit. . . well, Tom said he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have done, but even so, it didn't hang itself from the rafters, did it?"

"I shouldn't think so, no," said Dumbledore quietly.

"But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then" — Mrs. Cole took another swig of gin, slopping a little over her chin this time — "on the summer outing — we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the seaside — well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just gone exploring, but something happened in there, I'm sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things. . . ."

She looked around at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. "I don't think many people will be sorry to see the back of him."

"You understand, I'm sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently?" said Dumbledore. "He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer."

"Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker," said Mrs. Cole with a slight hiccup. She got to her feet, and Harry was impressed to see that she was quite steady, even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone. "I suppose you'd like to see him?"

"Very much," said Dumbledore, rising too.

She led him out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she passed. The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place in which to grow up.

"Here we are," said Mrs. Cole, as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor. She knocked twice and entered.

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton — sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you — well, I'll let him do it."

Harry and the two Dumbledores entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them. It was a small bare room with nothing in it except an old

wardrobe and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the gray blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale. His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment's silence.

"How do you do, Tom?" said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated, then took it, and they shook hands. Dumbledore drew up the hard wooden chair beside Riddle, so that the pair of them looked rather like a hospital patient and visitor.

"I am Professor Dumbledore."

"'Professor'?" repeated Riddle. He looked wary. "Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?"

He was pointing at the door through which Mrs. Cole had just left.

"No, no," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"I don't believe you," said Riddle. "She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!"

He spoke the last three words with a ringing force that was almost shocking. It was a command, and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. His eyes had widened and he was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly. After a few seconds Riddle stopped glaring, though he looked, if anything, warier still.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school — your new school, if you would like to come."

Riddle's reaction to this was most surprising. He leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious.

"You can't kid me! The asylum, that's where you're from, isn't it? 'Professor,' yes, of course — well, I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they'll tell you!

"I am not from the asylum," said Dumbledore patiently. "I am a teacher and, if you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts. Of course, if you would rather not come to the school, nobody will force you —"

"I'd like to see them try," sneered Riddle.

"Hogwarts," Dumbledore went on, as though he had not heard Riddle's last words, "is a school for people with special abilities —"

"I'm not mad!"

"I know that you are not mad. Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic."

There was silence. Riddle had frozen, his face expressionless, but his eyes were flickering back and forth between each of Dumbledore's, as though trying to catch one of them lying.

"Magic?" he repeated in a whisper.

"That's right," said Dumbledore.

"It's. . . it's magic, what I can do?"

"What is it that you can do?"

"All sorts," breathed Riddle. A flush of excitement was rising up his neck into his hollow cheeks; he looked fevered. "I can make filings move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."

His legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer.

"I knew I was different," he whispered to his own quivering fingers. "I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something."

"Well, you were quite right," said Dumbledore, who was no longer smiling, but watching Riddle intently. "You are a wizard."

Riddle lifted his head. His face was transfigured: There was a wild happiness upon it, yet for some reason it did not make him better looking; on the contrary, his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial.

"Are you a wizard too?"

"Yes, I am."

"Prove it," said Riddle at once, in the same commanding tone he had used when he had said, "Tell the truth."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts—"

"Of course I am!"

"Then you will address me as 'Professor' or 'sir.'"

Riddle's expression hardened for the most fleeting moment before he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, "I'm sorry, sir. I meant — please, Professor, could you show me — ?"

Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to refuse, that he would tell Riddle there would be plenty of time for practical demonstrations at Hogwarts, that they were currently in a building full of Muggles and must therefore be cautious. To his great surprise, however, Dumbledore drew his wand from an inside pocket of his suit jacket, pointed it at the shabby wardrobe in the corner, and gave the wand a casual flick.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

Riddle jumped to his feet; Harry could hardly blame him for howling in shock and rage; all his worldly possessions must be in there. But even as Riddle rounded on Dumbledore, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged.

Riddle stared from the wardrobe to Dumbledore; then, his expression greedy, he pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of them?"

"All in good time," said Dumbledore. "I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe."

And sure enough, a faint rattling could be heard from inside it. For the first time, Riddle looked frightened.

"Open the door," said Dumbledore.

Riddle hesitated, then crossed the room and threw open the wardrobe door. On the topmost shelf, above a rail of threadbare clothes, a small cardboard box was shaking and rattling as though there were several frantic mice trapped inside it.

"Take it out," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took down the quaking box. He looked unnerved.

"Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?" asked Dumbledore.

Riddle threw Dumbledore a long, clear, calculating look. "Yes, I suppose so, sir," he said finally, in an expressionless voice.

"Open it," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took off the lid and tipped the contents onto his bed without looking at them. Harry, who had expected something much more exciting, saw a mess of small, everyday objects: a yo-yo, a silver thimble, and a tarnished mouth organ among them. Once free of the box, they stopped quivering and lay quite still upon the thin blankets.

"You will return them to their owners with your apologies," said Dumbledore calmly, putting his wand back into his jacket. "I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts."

Riddle did not look remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. At last he said in a colorless voice, "Yes, sir."

"At Hogwarts," Dumbledore went on, "we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have — inadvertently, I am sure — been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic — yes, there is a Ministry — will punish lawbreakers still more severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws."

"Yes, sir," said Riddle again.

It was impossible to tell what he was thinking; his face remained quite blank as he put the little cache of stolen objects back into the cardboard box. When he had finished, he turned to Dumbledore and said baldly, "I haven't got any money."

"That is easily remedied," said Dumbledore, drawing a leather money-pouch from his pocket. "There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require

assistance to buy books and robes. You might have to buy some of your spellbooks and so on secondhand, but —"

"Where do you buy spellbooks?" interrupted Riddle, who had taken the heavy money bag without thanking Dumbledore, and was now examining a fat gold Galleon,

"In Diagon Alley," said Dumbledore. "I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything —"

"You're coming with me?" asked Riddle, looking up.

"Certainly, if you —"

"I don't need you," said Riddle. "I'm used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley — sir?" he added, catching Dumbledore's eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but once again he was surprised. Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope containing his list of equipment, and after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, he said, "You will be able to see it, although Muggles around you — non-magical people, that is — will not. Ask for Tom the barman — easy enough to remember, as he shares your name —"

Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as though trying to displace an irksome fly.

"You dislike the name 'Tom'?"

"There are a lot of Toms," muttered Riddle. Then, as though he could not suppress the question, as though it burst from him in spite of himself, he asked, "Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they've told me."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Dumbledore, his voice gentle.

"My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died," said Riddle, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must've been him. So — when I've got all my stuff— when do I come to this Hogwarts?"

"All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope," said Dumbledore. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."

Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips — they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

Harry could tell that he had withheld mention of this strangest power until that moment, determined to impress.

"It is unusual," said Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation, "but not unheard of."

His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face. They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other. Then the handshake was broken; Dumbledore was at the door.

"Good-bye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

"I think that will do," said the white-haired Dumbledore at Harry's side, and seconds later, they were soaring weightlessly through darkness once more, before landing squarely in the present-day office.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore, landing beside Harry.

Harry obeyed, his mind still full of what he had just seen.

"He believed it much quicker than I did — I mean, when you told him he was a wizard," said Harry. "I didn't believe Hagrid at first, when he told me."

"Yes, Riddle was perfectly ready to believe that he was — to use his word — 'special,'" said Dumbledore.

"Did you know — then?" asked Harry.

"Did I know that I had just met the most dangerous Dark wizard of all time?" said Dumbledore. "No, I had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is. However, I was certainly intrigued by him. I returned to Hogwarts intending to keep an eye upon him, something I should have done in any case, given that he was alone and friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others' sake as much as his.

"His powers, as you heard, were surprisingly well-developed for such a young wizard and — most interestingly and ominously of all — he had already discovered that he had some measure of control over them, and begun to use them consciously. And as you saw, they were not the random experiments typical of young wizards: He was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control. The little stories of the strangled rabbit and the young boy and girl he lured into a cave were most suggestive. . . . 'I can make them hurt if I want to. . . .'"

"And he was a Parselmouth," interjected Harry.

"Yes, indeed; a rare ability, and one supposedly connected with the Dark Arts, although as we know, there are Parselmouths among the great and the good too. In fact, his ability to speak to serpents did not make me nearly as uneasy as his obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination.

"Time is making fools of us again," said Dumbledore, indicating the dark sky beyond the windows. "But before we part, I want to draw your attention to certain features of the scene we have just witnessed, for they have a great bearing on the matters we shall be discussing in future meetings.

"Firstly, I hope you noticed Riddle's reaction when I mentioned that another shared his first name, 'Tom'?"

Harry nodded.

"There he showed his contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary. Even then, he wished to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name, as you know, within a few short years of that conversation and created the mask of 'Lord Voldemort' behind which he has been hidden for so long.

"I trust that you also noticed that Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive, and, apparently, friendless? He did not want help or companionship on his trip to Diagon Alley. He preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. You will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.

"And lastly — I hope you are not too sleepy to pay attention to this, Harry — the young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles he had hidden in his room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of magic. Bear in mind this magpie-like tendency, for this, particularly, will be important later.

"And now, it really is time for bed."

Harry got to his feet. As he walked across the room, his eyes fell upon the little table on which Marvolo Gaunt's ring had rested last time, but the ring was no longer there.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore, for Harry had come to a halt.

"The ring's gone," said Harry, looking around. "But I thought you might have the mouth organ or something."

Dumbledore beamed at him, peering over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"Very astute, Harry, but the mouth organ was only ever a mouth organ."

And on that enigmatic note he waved to Harry, who understood himself to be dismissed.

Chapter 14: Felix Felicis

Harry had Herbology first thing the following morning. He had been unable to tell Ron and Hermione about his lesson with Dumbledore over breakfast for fear of being over-heard, but he filled them in as they walked across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses. The weekend's brutal wind had died out at last; the weird mist had returned and it took them a little longer than usual to find the correct greenhouse.

"Wow, scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who," said Ron quietly, as they took their places around one of the gnarled Snargaluff stumps that formed this term's project, and began pulling on their protective gloves. "But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you all this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?"

"Dunno," said Harry, inserting a gum shield. "But he says it's all important and it'll help me survive."

"I think it's fascinating," said Hermione earnestly. "It makes absolute sense to know as much about Voldemort as possible. How else will you find out his weaknesses?"

"So how was Slughorn's latest party?" Harry asked her thickly through the gum shield.

"Oh, it was quite fun, really," said Hermione, now putting on protective goggles. "I mean, he drones on about famous exploits a bit, and he

absolutely fawns on McLaggen because he's so well connected, but he gave us some really nice food and he introduced us to Gwenog Jones."

"Gwenog Jones?" said Ron, his eyes widening under his own goggles. "The Gwenog Jones? Captain of the Holyhead Harpies?"

"That's right," said Hermione. "Personally, I thought she was a bit full of herself, but —"

"Quite enough chat over here!" said Professor Sprout briskly, bustling over and looking stern. "You're lagging behind, everybody else has started, and Neville's already got his first pod!"

They looked around; sure enough, there sat Neville with a bloody lip and several nasty scratches along the side of his face, but clutching an unpleasantly pulsating green object about the size of a grapefruit.

"Okay, Professor, we're starting now!" said Ron, adding quietly, when she had turned away again, "should've used Muffliato, Harry."

"No, we shouldn't!" said Hermione at once, looking, as she always did, intensely cross at the thought of the Half-Blood Prince and his spells. "Well, come on ... we'd better get going. ..."

She gave the other two an apprehensive look; they all took deep breaths and then dived at the gnarled stump between them.

It sprang to life at once; long, prickly, bramblelike vines flew out of the top and whipped through the air. One tangled itself in Hermione's hair, and Ron beat it back with a pair of secateurs; Harry succeeded in trapping a couple of vines and knotting them together; a hole opened in the middle of all the tentaclelike branches; Hermione plunged her arm bravely into this hole, which closed like a trap around her elbow; Harry and Ron tugged and wrenched at the vines, forcing the hole to open again, and Hermione snatched her arm free, clutching in her fingers a pod just like Neville's. At once, the prickly vines shot back inside, and the gnarled stump sat there looking like an innocently dead lump of wood.

"You know, I don't think I'll be having any of these in my garden when I've got my own place," said Ron, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead and wiping sweat from his face.

"Pass me a bowl," said Hermione, holding the pulsating pod at arm's length; Harry handed one over and she dropped the pod into it with a look of disgust on her face.

"Don't be squeamish, squeeze it out, they're best when they're fresh!" called Professor Sprout.

"Anyway," said Hermione, continuing their interrupted conversation as though a lump of wood had not just attacked them, "Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come."

Harry groaned. Meanwhile, Ron, who was attempting to burst the pod in the bowl by putting both hands on it, standing up, and squashing it as hard as he could, said angrily, "And this is another party just for Slughorn's favorites, is it?"

"Just for the Slug Club, yes," said Hermione.

The pod flew out from under Ron's fingers and hit the green house glass, rebounding onto the back of Professor Sprout's head and knocking off her old, patched hat. Harry went to retrieve the pod; when he got back, Hermione was saying, "Look, I didn't make up the name 'Slug Club' —"

"'Slug Club,'" repeated Ron with a sneer worthy of Malfoy. "It's pathetic. Well, I hope you enjoy your party. Why don't you try hooking up with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug —"

"We're allowed to bring guests," said Hermione, who for some reason had turned a bright, boiling scarlet, "and I was going to ask you to come, but if you think it's that stupid then I won't bother!"

Harry suddenly wished the pod had flown a little farther, so that he need not have been sitting here with the pair of them. Unnoticed by either, he seized the bowl that contained the pod and began to try and open it by the noisiest and most energetic means he could think of; unfortunately, he could still hear every word of their conversation.

"You were going to ask me?" asked Ron, in a completely different voice.

"Yes," said Hermione angrily. "But obviously if you'd rather I hooked up with McLaggen ..."

There was a pause while Harry continued to pound the resilient pod with a trowel.

"No, I wouldn't," said Ron, in a very quiet voice.

Harry missed the pod, hit the bowl, and shattered it.

"Reparo," he said hastily, poking the pieces with his wand, and the bowl sprang back together again. The crash, however, appeared to have awoken Ron and Hermione to Harry's presence. Hermione looked flustered and immediately started fussing about for her copy of "Flesh-Eating Trees of the World" to find out the correct way to juice Snargaluff pods; Ron, on the other hand, looked sheepish but also rather pleased with himself.

"Hand that over, Harry," said Hermione hurriedly. "It says we're supposed to puncture them with something sharp. . . ."

Harry passed her the pod in the bowl; he and Ron both snapped their goggles back over their eyes and dived, once more, for the stump. It was not as though he was really surprised, thought Harry, as he wrestled with a thorny vine intent upon throttling him; he had had an inkling that this might happen sooner or later. But he was not sure how he felt about it. ... He and

Cho were now too em-barrassed to look at each other, let alone talk to each other; what if Ron and Hermione started going out together, then split up? Could their friendship survive it? Harry remembered the few weeks when they had not been talking to each other in the third year; he had not enjoyed trying to bridge the distance between them. And then, what if they didn't split up? What if they became like Bill and Fleur, and it became excruciatingly embarrassing to be in their presence, so that he was shut out for good?

"Gotcha!" yelled Ron, pulling a second pod from the stump just as Hermione managed to burst the first one open, so that the bowl was full of tubers wriggling like pale green worms.

The rest of the lesson passed without further mention of Slughorn's party. Although Harry watched his two friends more closely over the next few days, Ron and Hermione did not seem any different except that they were a little politer to each other than usual. Harry supposed he would just have to wait to see what

happened under the influence of butterbeer in Slughorn's dimly lit room on the night of the party. In the meantime, however, he had more pressing worries.

Katie Bell was still in St. Mungo's Hospital with no prospect of leaving, which meant that the promising Gryffindor team Harry had been training so carefully since September was one Chaser short. He kept putting off replacing Katie in the hope that she would return, but their opening match

against Slytherin was loom-ing, and he finally had to accept that she would not be back in time to play.

Harry did not think he could stand another full-House tryout. With a sinking feeling that had little to do with Quidditch, he cornered Dean Thomas after Transfiguration one day. Most of the class had already left, although several twittering yellow birds were still zooming around the room, all of Hermione's creation; nobody else had succeeded in conjuring so much as a feather from thin air.

"Are you still interested in playing Chaser?"

"Wha — ? Yeah, of course!" said Dean excitedly. Over Dean's shoulder, Harry saw Seamus Finnegan slamming his books into his bag, looking sour. One of the reasons why Harry would have preferred not to have to ask Dean to play was that he knew Seamus would not like it. On the other hand, he had to do what was best for the team, and Dean had outflown Seamus at the tryouts.

"Well then, you're in," said Harry. "There's a practice tonight, seven o'clock."

"Right," said Dean. "Cheers, Harry! Blimey, I can't wait to tell Ginny!"

He sprinted out of the room, leaving Harry and Seamus alone together, an uncomfortable moment made no easier when a bird dropping landed on Seamus's head as one of Hermione's canaries whizzed over them.

Seamus was not the only person disgruntled by the choice of Katie's substitute. There was much muttering in the common room about the fact that Harry had now chosen two of his class-mates for the team. As Harry had endured much worse mutterings than this in his school career, he was not particularly bothered, but all the same, the pressure was increasing to provide a win in the upcoming match against Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, Harry knew that the whole House would forget that they had criticized him and swear that they had always known it was a great team. If they lost. . . well, Harry thought wryly, he had still endured worse mutterings. . . .

Harry had no reason to regret his choice once he saw Dean fly that evening; he worked well with Ginny and Demelza. The Beaters, Peakes and Coote, were getting better all the time. The only problem was Ron.

Harry had known all along that Ron was an inconsistent player who suffered from nerves and a lack of confidence, and unfortunately, the looming prospect of the opening game of the season seemed to have brought out all his old insecurities. After letting in half a dozen goals, most of them scored by Ginny, his technique became wilder and wilder, until he finally punched an oncoming Demelza Robins in the mouth.

"It was an accident, I'm sorry, Demelza, really sorry!" Ron shouted after her as she zigzagged back to the ground, dripping blood everywhere. "I just ___"

"Panicked," Ginny said angrily, landing next to Demelza and examining her fat lip. "You prat, Ron, look at the state of her!"

"I can fix that," said Harry, landing beside the two girls, pointing his wand at Demelzas mouth, and saying "Episkey." "And Ginny, don't call Ron a prat, you're not the Captain of this team —"

"Well, you seemed too busy to call him a prat and I thought someone should —"

Harry forced himself not to laugh.

"In the air, everyone, let's go. . . ."

Overall it was one of the worst practices they had had all term, though Harry did not feel that honesty was the best policy when they were this close to the match.

"Good work, everyone, I think we'll flatten Slytherin," he said bracingly, and the Chasers and Beaters left the changing room looking reasonably happy with themselves.

"I played like a sack of dragon dung," said Ron in a hollow voice when the door had swung shut behind Ginny.

"No, you didn't," said Harry firmly. "You're the best Keeper I tried out, Ron. Your only problem is nerves."

He kept up a relentless flow of encouragement all the way back to the castle, and by the time they reached the second floor, Ron was looking marginally more cheerful. When Harry pushed open the tapestry to take their usual shortcut up to Gryffindor Tower, however, they found themselves looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked in a close embrace and kissing fiercely as though glued together.

It was as though something large and scaly erupted into life in Harry's stomach, clawing at his insides: Hot blood seemed to flood his brain, so that all thought was extinguished, replaced by a savage urge to jinx Dean into a jelly. Wrestling with this sudden madness, he heard Ron's voice as though from a great distance away.

“Oi!”

Dean and Ginny broke apart and looked around. "What?" said Ginny.

"I don't want to find my own sister snogging people in public!" "This was a deserted corridor till you came butting in!" said Ginny.

Dean was looking embarrassed. He gave Harry a shifty grin that Harry did not return, as the newborn monster inside him was roar-ing for Dean's instant dismissal from the team.

"Er . . . c'mon, Ginny," said Dean, "let's go back to the common room. ..."

"You go!" said Ginny. "I want a word with my dear brother!" Dean left, looking as though he was not sorry to depart the scene.

"Right," said Ginny, tossing her long red hair out of her face and glaring at Ron, "let's get this straight once and for all. It is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them, Ron —" "Yeah, it is!" said Ron, just as angrily. "D' you think I want peo-ple saying my sister's a —"

"A what?" shouted Ginny, drawing her wand. "A what, exactly?" "He doesn't mean anything, Ginny —" said Harry automati-cally, though the monster was roaring its approval of Ron's words. "Oh yes he does!" she said, flaring up at Harry. "Just because he's never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss he's ever had is from our Auntie Muriel —"

"Shut your mouth!" bellowed Ron, bypassing red and turning maroon.

"No, I will not!" yelled Ginny, beside herself. "I've seen you with Phlegm, hoping she'll kiss you on the cheek every time you see her, it's pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done your self, you wouldn't mind so much that everyone else does it!"

Ron had pulled out his wand too; Harry stepped swiftly between them.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Ron roared, trying to get a clear shot at Ginny around Harry, who was now standing in front of her with his arms outstretched. "Just because I don't do it in public — !"

Ginny screamed with derisive laughter, trying to push Harry out of the way.

"Been kissing Pigwidgeon, have you? Or have you got a picture of Auntie Muriel stashed under your pillow?" You —

A streak of orange light flew under Harry's left arm and missed Ginny by inches; Harry pushed Ron up against the wall.

"Don't be stupid —"

"Harry's snogged Cho Chang!" shouted Ginny, who sounded close to tears now. "And Hermione snogged Viktor Krum, it's only you who acts like it's something disgusting, Ron, and that's because you've got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!"

And with that, she stormed away. Harry quickly let go of Ron; the look on his face was murderous. They both stood there, breathing heavily, until Mrs. Norris, Rich's cat, appeared around the corner, which broke the tension.

"C'mon," said Harry, as the sound of Filch's shuffling feet reached their ears.

They hurried up the stairs and along a seventh-floor corridor. "Oi, out of the way!" Ron barked at a small girl who jumped in fright and dropped a bottle of toadspawn.

Harry hardly noticed the sound of shattering glass; he felt dis-oriented, dizzy; being struck by a lightning bolt must be something like this. It's just because she's Ron's sister, he told himself. You just didn't like seeing her kissing Dean because she's Ron's sister. . . .

But unbidden into his mind came an image of that same de-serted corridor with himself kissing Ginny instead. . . . The mon-ster in his chest purred . . . but then he saw Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry, shouting things like "betrayal of trust" . . . "supposed to be my friend" . . .

"D'you think Hermione did snog Krum?" Ron asked abruptly, as they approached the Fat Lady. Harry gave a guilty start and wrenched his imagination away from a corridor in which no Ron intruded, in which he and Ginny were quite alone — "What?" he said confusedly. "Oh ... er ..." The honest answer was "yes," but he did not want to give it. However, Ron seemed to gather the worst from the look on Harry's face.

"Dilligrout," he said darkly to the Fat Lady, and they climbed through the portrait hole into the common room.

Neither of them mentioned Ginny or Hermione again; indeed, they barely spoke to each other that evening and got into bed in si-lence, each absorbed in his own thoughts,

Harry lay awake for a long time, looking up at the canopy of his four-poster and trying to convince himself that his feelings for Ginny were entirely elder-brotherly. They had lived, had they not, like brother and sister all summer, playing Quidditch, teasing Ron, and having a laugh about Bill and Phlegm? He had known Ginny for years now. ... It was natural that he should feel protective . . . natural that he should want to look out for her . . . want to rip Dean limb from limb for kissing her... No ... he would have to control that particular brotherly feeling. . . .

Ron gave a great grunting snore.

She's Ron's sister, Harry told himself firmly. Ron's sister. She's out-of-bounds. He would not risk his friendship with Ron for anything. He punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and waited for sleep to come, trying his utmost not to allow his thoughts to stray anywhere near Ginny.

Harry awoke next morning feeling slightly dazed and confused by a series of dreams in which Ron had chased him with a Beater's bat, but by midday he would have happily exchanged the dream Ron for the real one, who was not only cold-shouldering Ginny and Dean, but also treating a hurt and bewildered Hermione with an icy, sneering indifference. What was more, Ron seemed to have become, overnight, as touchy and ready to lash out as the average Blast-Ended Skrewt. Harry spent the day attempting to keep the peace between Ron and Hermione with no success; finally, Hermione departed for bed in high dudgeon, and Ron stalked off to the boys' dormitory after swearing angrily at several frightened first years for looking at him.

To Harry's dismay, Ron's new aggression did not wear off over the next few days. Worse still, it coincided with an even deeper dip in his Keeping skills, which made him still more aggressive, so that during the final Quidditch practice before Saturdays match, he failed to save every single goal the Chasers aimed at him, but bellowed at everybody so much that he reduced Demelza Robins to tears.

"You shut up and leave her alone!" shouted Peakes, who was about two-thirds Ron's height, though admittedly carrying a heavy bat.

"ENOUGH!" bellowed Harry, who had seen Ginny glowering in Ron's direction and, remembering her reputation as an accomplished caster of the Bat-Bogey Hex, soared over to intervene before things got out of hand. "Peakes, go and pack up the Bludgers. Demelza, pull yourself together, you played really well today, Ron . . ." he waited until the rest of the team were out of earshot before saying it, "you're my best mate, but carry on treating the rest of them like this and I'm going to kick you off the team."

He really thought for a moment that Ron might hit him, but then something much worse happened: Ron seemed to sag on his broom. all the fight went out of him and he said, "I resign. I'm pathetic."

"You're not pathetic and you're not resigning!" said Harry fiercely, seizing Ron by the front of his robes. "You can save any-thing when you're on form, it's a mental problem you've got!" "You calling me mental?" "Yeah, maybe I am!"

They glared at each other for a moment, then Ron shook his head wearily. "I know you haven't got any time to find another Keeper, so I'll play tomorrow, but if we lose, and we will, I'm tak-ing myself off the team."

Nothing Harry said made any difference. He tried boosting Ron's confidence all through dinner, but Ron was too busy being grumpy and surly with Hermione to notice. Harry persisted in the common room that evening, but his assertion that the whole team would be devastated if Ron left was somewhat undermined by the fact that the rest of the team was sitting in a huddle in a distant corner, clearly muttering about Ron and casting him nasty looks. Finally Harry tried getting angry again in the hope of provoking Ron into a defiant, and hopefully goal-saving, attitude, but this strategy did not appear to work any better than encouragement; Ron went to bed as dejected and hopeless as ever.

Harry lay awake for a very long time in the darkness. He did not want to lose the upcoming match; not only was it his first as Cap-tain, but he was determined to beat Draco Malfoy at Quidditch even if he could not yet prove his suspicions about him. Yet if Ron played as he had done in the last few practices, their chances of winning were very slim. . . .

If only there was something he could do to make Ron pull him-self together . . . make him play at the top of his form . . . some-thing that would ensure that Ron had a really good day. . . .

And the answer came to Harry in one, sudden, glorious stroke of inspiration.

Breakfast was the usual excitable affair next morning; the Slytherins hissed and booed loudly as every member of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall. Harry glanced at the ceiling and saw a clear, pale blue sky: a good omen.

The Gryffindor table, a solid mass of red and gold, cheered as Harry and Ron approached. Harry grinned and waved; Ron gri-maced weakly and shook his head.

"Cheer up, Ron!" called Lavender. "I know you'll be brilliant!" : Ron ignored her.

"Tea?" Harry asked him. "Coffee? Pumpkin juice?" "Anything," said Ron glumly, taking a moody bite of toast.

A few minutes later Hermione, who had become so tired of Ron's recent unpleasant behavior that she had not come down to breakfast with them, paused on her way up the table.

"How are you both feeling?" she asked tentatively, her eyes on the back of Ron's head.

"Fine," said Harry, who was concentrating on handing Ron a glass of pumpkin juice. "There you go, Ron. Drink up."

Ron had just raised the glass to his lips when Hermione spoke

sharply.

"Don't drink that, Ron!"

Both Harry and Ron looked up at her.

"Why not?" said Ron.

Hermione was now staring at Harry as though she could not believe her eyes.

"You just put something in that drink."

"Excuse me?" said Harry.

"You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron's drink. You've got the bottle in your hand right now!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Harry, stowing the little bottle hastily in his pocket.

"Ron, I warn you, don't drink it!" Hermione said again, alarmed, but Ron picked up the glass, drained it in one gulp, and said, "Stop bossing me around, Hermione."

She looked scandalized. Bending low so that only Harry could hear her, she hissed, "You should be expelled for that. I'd never have believed it of you, Harry!"

"Look who's talking," he whispered back. "Confunded anyone lately?"

She stormed up the table away from them. Harry watched her go without regret. Hermione had never really understood what a serious business Quidditch was. He then looked around at Ron, who was smacking his lips.

"Nearly time/" said Harry blithely.

The frosty grass crunched underfoot as they strode down to the stadium.

"Pretty lucky the weathers this good, eh?" Harry asked Ron.

"Yeah," said Ron, who was pale and sick-looking.

Ginny and Demelza were already wearing their Quidditch robes and waiting in the changing room.

"Conditions look ideal," said Ginny, ignoring Ron. "And guess what? That Slytherin Chaser Vaisey — he took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he's too sore to play! And even better than that — Malfoy's gone off sick too!"

"What?" said Harry, wheeling around to stare at her. "He's ill? What's wrong with him?"

"No idea, but it's great for us," said Ginny brightly. "They're playing Harper instead; he's in my year and he's an idiot."

Harry smiled back vaguely, but as he pulled on his scarlet robes his mind was far from Quidditch. Malfoy had once before claimed he could not play due to injury, but on that occasion he had made sure the whole match was rescheduled for a time that suited the Slytherins better. Why was he now happy to let a substitute go on? Was he really ill, or was he faking?

"Fishy, isn't it?" he said in an undertone to Ron. "Malfoy not playing?"

"Lucky, I call it," said Ron, looking slightly more animated. "And Vaisey off too, he's their best goal scorer, I didn't fancy — hey!" he said suddenly, freezing halfway through pulling on his Keepers gloves and staring at Harry.

"What?"

"I... you . . ." Ron had dropped his voice, he looked both scared and excited. "My drink ... my pumpkin juice ... you didn't...?"

Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing except, "We'll be starting in about five minutes, you'd better get your boots on."

They walked out onto the pitch to tumultuous roars and boos. One end of the stadium was solid red and gold; the other, a sea of green and silver. Many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had taken sides too: Amidst all the yelling and clapping Harry could distinctly hear the roar of Luna Lovegood's famous lion-topped hat.

Harry stepped up to Madam Hooch, the referee, who was standing ready to release the balls from the crate.

"Captains shake hands," she said, and Harry had his hand crushed by the new Slytherin Captain, Urquhart. "Mount your brooms. On the whistle . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

The whistle sounded, Harry and the others kicked off hard from the frozen ground, and they were away.

Harry soared around the perimeter of the grounds, looking around for the Snitch and keeping one eye on Harper, who was zigzagging far below him. Then a voice that was jarringly different to the usual commentator's started up.

"Well, there they go, and I think we're all surprised to see the team that Potter's put together this year. Many thought, given Ronald Weasley's patchy performance as Keeper last year, that he might be off the team, but of course, a close personal friendship with the Captain does help. . . ."

These words were greeted with jeers and applause from the Slytherin end of the pitch. Harry craned around on his broom to look toward the commentator's podium. A call, skinny blond buy with an upturned nose was standing there, talking into the magical megaphone that had once been Lee Jordan's; Harry recognized Zacharias Smith, a Hufflepuff player whom he heartily disliked.

"Oh, and here comes Slytherin's first attempt on goal, it's Urquhart streaking down the pitch and —"

Harry's stomach turned over.

"— Weasley saves it, well, he's bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose. . . ."

"That's right, Smith, he is," muttered Harry, grinning to him-self, as he dived amongst the Chasers with his eyes searching all around for some hint of the elusive Snitch.

With half an hour of the game gone, Gryffindor were leading sixty points to zero, Ron having made some truly spectacular saves, some by the very tips of his gloves, and Ginny having scored four of Gryffindor's six goals. This effectively stopped Zacharias wondering loudly whether the two Weasleys were only there because Harry liked them, and he started on Peakes and Coote instead.

"Of course, Coote isn't really the usual build for a Beater," said Zacharias loftily, "they've generally got a bit more muscle —"

"Hit a Bludger at him!" Harry called to Coote as he zoomed past, but Coote, grinning broadly, chose to aim the next Bludger at Harper instead, who was just passing Harry in the opposite direction. Harry was pleased to hear the dull thunk that meant the Bludger had found its mark.

It seemed as though Gryffindor could do no wrong. Again and again they scored, and again and again, at the other end of the pitch, Ron saved goals with apparent ease. He was actually smiling now, and when the crowd greeted a particularly good save with a

rousing chorus of the old favorite "Weasley Is Our King," he pre-tended to conduct them from on high.

"Thinks he's something special today, doesn't he?" said a snide voice, and Harry was nearly knocked off his broom as Harper collided with him hard and deliberately. "Your blood-traitor pal..." Madam Hooch's back was turned, and though Gryffindors below shouted in anger, by the time she looked around, Harper had already sped off. His shoulder aching, Harry raced after him, determined to ram him back. ...

"And I think Harper of Slytherin's seen the Snitch!" said Zacharias Smith through his megaphone. "Yes, he's certainly seen something Potter hasn't!"

Smith really was an idiot, thought Harry, hadn't he noticed them collide? But next moment, his stomach seemed to drop out of the sky — Smith was right and Harry was wrong: Harper had not sped upward at random; he had spotted what Harry had not: The Snitch was speeding along high above them, glinting brightly against the clear blue sky.

Harry accelerated; the wind was whistling in his ears so that it drowned all sound of Smith's commentary or the crowd, but Harper was still ahead of him, and Gryffindor was only a hundred points up; if Harper got there first Gryffindor had lost. . . and now Harper was feet from it, his hand outstretched. ...

"Oi, Harper!" yelled Harry in desperation. "How much did Malfoy pay you to come on instead of him?"

He did not know what made him say it, but Harper did a double-take; he fumbled the Snitch, let it slip through his fingers, and shot right past it. Harry made a great swipe for the tiny, fluttering ball and caught it.

"YES!" Harry yelled. Wheeling around, he hurtled back toward the ground, the Snitch held high in his hand. As the crowd realized what had happened, a great shout went up that almost drowned the sound of the whistle that signaled the end of the game.

"Ginny, where're you going?" yelled Harry, who had found himself trapped in the midst of a mass midair hug with the rest of his team, but Ginny sped right on past them until, with an almighty crash, she collided

with the commentators podium. As the crowd shrieked and laughed, the Gryffindor team landed beside the wreckage of wood under which Zacharias was feebly stirring. Harry heard Ginny saying blithely to an irate Professor McGonagall, "Forgot to brake, Professor, sorry."

Laughing, Harry broke free of the rest of the team and hugged Ginny, but let go very quickly. Avoiding her gaze, he clapped cheering Ron on the back instead as, all enmity forgotten, the Gryffindor team left the pitch arm in arm, punching the air and waving to their supporters.

The atmosphere in the changing room was jubilant. "Party up in the common room, Seamus said!" yelled Dean exuberantly. "C'mon, Ginny, Demelza!"

Ron and Harry were the last two in the changing room. They were just about to leave when Hermione entered. She was twisting her Gryffindor scarf in her hands and looked upset but determined. "I want a word with you, Harry." She took a deep breath. "You shouldn't have done it. You heard Slughorn, its illegal." "What are you going to do, turn us in?" demanded Ron. "What are you two talking about?" asked Harry, turning away to hang up his robes so that neither of them would see him grinning, "You know perfectly well what we're talking about!" said Hermione shrilly. "You spiked Rons juice with lucky potion at breakfast! I'elix Felicis!"

"No, I didn't," said Harry, turning back to face them both.

"Yes you did, Harry, and that's why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!"

"I didn't put it in!" said Harry, grinning broadly. He slipped his hand inside his jacket pocket and drew out the tiny bottle that Hermione had seen in his hand that morning. It was full of golden potion and the cork was still tightly sealed with wax. "I wanted Ron to think I'd done it, so I faked it when I knew you were look-ing." He looked at Ron. "You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself."

He pocketed the potion again.

"There really wasn't anything in my pumpkin juice?" Ron said, astounded. "But the weather's good. . . and Vaisey couldn't play. ... I honestly haven't been given lucky potion?"]

Harry shook his head. Ron gaped at him for a moment, then rounded on Hermione, imitating her voice. "You added Felix Felicis to Ron's juice this morning, that's why he saved everything! See! I can save goals without help, Hermione!"

"I never said you couldn't — Ron, you thought you'd been given it too!"

But Ron had already strode past her out of the door with his broomstick over his shoulder.

"Er," said Harry into the sudden silence; he had not expected his plan to backfire like this, "shall. . . shall we go up to the party, then?"

"You go!" said Hermione, blinking back tears. "I'm sick of Ron at the moment, I don't know what I'm supposed to have done. . . ."

And she stormed out of the changing room too.

Harry walked slowly back up the grounds toward the castle through the crowd, many of whom shouted congratulations at him, but he felt a great sense of letdown; he had been sure that if Ron won the match, he and Hermione would be friends again immediately. He did not see how he could possibly explain to Hermi-one that what she had done to offend Ron was kiss Viktor Krum, not when the offense had occurred so long ago.

Harry could not see Hermione at the Gryffindor celebration party, which was in full swing when he arrived. Renewed cheers and clapping greeted his appearance, and he was soon surrounded by a mob of people congratulating him. What with trying to shake off the Creevey brothers, who wanted a blow-by-blow match analysis, and the large group of girls that encircled him, laughing at his least amusing comments and batting their eyelids, it was some time before he could try and find Ron. At last, he extricated him-self from Romilda Vane, who was hinting heavily that she would like to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with him. As he was duck-ing toward the drinks table, he walked straight into Ginny, Arnold the Pygmy Puff riding on her shoulder and Crookshanks mewing hopefully at her heels.

"Looking for Ron?" she asked, smirking. "He's over there, the filthy hypocrite."

Harry looked into the corner she was indicating. There, in full view of the whole room, stood Ron wrapped so closely around Lavender Brown it was hard to tell whose hands were whose.

"It looks like he's eating her face, doesn't it?" said Ginny dispassionately. "But I suppose he's got to refine his technique somehow. Good game, Harry."

She patted him on the arm; Harry felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, but then she walked off to help herself to more butterbeer. Crookshanks trotted after her, his yellow eyes fixed upon Arnold.

Harry turned away from Ron, who did not look like he would be surfacing soon, just as the portrait hole was closing. With a sinking feeling, he thought he saw a mane of bushy brown hair whipping out of sight.

He darted forward, sidestepped Romilda Vane again, and pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady. The corridor outside, seemed to be deserted.

"Hermione?"

He found her in the first unlocked classroom he tried. She was sitting on the teacher's desk, alone except for a small ring of twittering yellow birds

circling her head, which she had clearly just conjured out of midair. Harry could not help admiring her spell-work at a time like this.

"Oh, hello, Harry," she said in a brittle voice. "I was just practicing."

"Yeah . . . they're — er — really good. . . ." said Harry.

He had no idea what to say to her. He was just wondering whether there was any chance that she had not noticed Ron, that she had merely left the room because the party was a little too rowdy, when she said, in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, "Ron seems to be enjoying the celebrations."

"Er . . . does he?" said Harry.

"Don't pretend you didn't see him," said Hermione. "He wasn't exactly hiding it, was — ?"

The door behind them burst open. To Harry's horror, Ron came in, laughing, pulling Lavender by the hand. ; '

"Oh," he said, drawing up short at the sight of Harry and Hermione.

"Oops!" said Lavender, and she backed out of the room, gig-gling. The door swung shut behind her.

There was a horrible, swelling, billowing silence. Hermione was staring at Ron, who refused to look at her, but said with an odd mixture of bravado and awkwardness, "Hi, Harry! Wondered where you'd got to!"

Hermione slid off the desk. The little flock of golden birds continued to twitter in circles around her head so that she looked like a strange, feathery model of the solar system.

"You shouldn't leave Lavender waiting outside," she said quietly. "She'll wonder where you've gone."

She walked very slowly and erectly toward the door. Harry glanced at Ron, who was looking relieved that nothing worse had happened.

"Oppugno!" came a shriek from the doorway.

Harry spun around to see Hermione pointing her wand at Ron, her expression wild: The little flock of birds was speeding like a hail of fat golden bullets toward Ron, who yelped and covered his face with his hands, but the birds attacked, pecking and clawing at every bit of flesh they could reach.

"Gerremoffme!" he yelled, but with one last look of vindictive fury, Hermione wrenched open the door and disappeared through it. Harry thought he heard a sob before it slammed.

Chapter 15: The Unbreakable Vow

Snow was swirling against the icy windows once more; Christmas was approaching fast. Hagrid had already singlehandedly delivered the usual twelve Christmas trees to the Great Hall; garlands of holly and tinsel had been twisted around the banisters of the stairs; everlasting candles glowed from inside the helmets of suits of armor and great bunches of mistletoe had been hung at intervals along the corridors. Large groups of girls tended to converge underneath the mistletoe bunches every time Harry went past, which caused blockages in the corridors; fortunately, however, Harry's frequent nighttime wanderings had given him an unusually good knowledge of the castle's secret passageways, so that he was often, without too much difficulty, to navigate mistletoe-free routes between classes.

Ron, who might once have found the necessity of these detours excuse for jealousy rather than hilarity, simply roared with laughter about it all. Although Harry much preferred this new laughing, joking Ron to the moody, aggressive model he had been enduring for the last few weeks, the improved Ron came at a heavy price. Firstly, Harry had to put up with the frequent presence of Lavender Brown, who seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wasted; and secondly, Harry found himself once more the best friend of two people who seemed unlikely ever to speak to each other again.

Ron, whose hands and forearms still bore scratches and cuts from Hermione's bird attack, was taking a defensive and resentful tone.

"She can't complain," he told Harry. "She snogged Krum. So she's found out someone wants to snog me too. Well, it's a free country. I haven't done anything wrong."

Harry did not answer, but pretended to be absorbed in the book they were supposed to have read before Charms next morning (Quintessence: A Quest). Determined as he was to remain friends with both Ron and Hermione, he was spending a lot of time with his mouth shut tight.

"I never promised Hermione anything , " Ron mumbled. "I mean, all right, I was going to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with her, but she never said... just as friends... I'm a free agent..."

Harry turned a page of Quintessence, aware that Ron was watching him. Ron's voice trailed away in mutters, barely audible over the loud crackling of the fire, though Harry thought he caught the words "Krum" and "Can't complain" again.

Hermione's schedule was so full that Harry could only talk to her properly in the evenings, when Ron was, in any case, so tightly wrapped around Lavender that he did not notice what Harry was doing. Hermione refused to sit in the common room while Ron was there, So Harry generally joined her in the library, which meant that their conversations were held in whispers.

"He's at perfect liberty to kiss whomever he likes," said Hermione, while the librarian , Madam Pince, prowled the shelves behind them. "I really couldn't care less."

She raised her quill and dotted an 'i' so ferociously that she punctured a hole in her parchment. Harry said nothing. He thought his voice might soon vanish from the lack of use. He bent a little lower over Advanced Potion-Making and continued to make notes on Everlasting Elixirs, occasionally pausing to decipher the prince's useful additions to Libatius Borage's text.

"And incidentally," said Hermione, after a few moments, "you need to be careful."

"For the last time," said Harry, speaking in a slightly hoarse tone after three-quarters of an hour of silence, "I am not giving back this book. I've learned more from the Half-blood prince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in--"

"I'm not talking about your stupid so-called prince," said Hermione, giving his book a nasty look as though it had been rude to her. "I'm talking about earlier. I went into the girl's bathroom just before I came in here and there were about a dozen girls in there, including that Romilda Vane, trying to decide how to slip you a love potion. They're all hoping they're going to get you to take them to Slughorn's party, and they all seem to have bought Fred and George's love potions, which I'm afraid to say probably work --"

"Why didn't you confiscate them then?" demanded Harry, it seemed extraordinary that Hermione's mania for upholding the rules could have abandoned her at this crucial juncture.

"They didn't have the potions with them in the bathroom," said Hermione scornfully, "They were just discussing tactics. As I doubt the Half-blood prince" she gave the book another scornful look "could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I'd just invite someone to go with you, that'll stop all the others thinking they've still got a chance. It's tomorrow night, they're getting desperate."

"There isn't anyone I want to invite," mumbled Harry, who was still not trying to think about Ginny any more than he could help, despite the fact the fact that she kept cropping up in his dreams in ways that made him devoutly thankful that Ron could not perform Legilimency.

"Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Vane looked like she meant business." said Hermione grimly.

She hitched up the long roll of parchment on which she was writing her Arithmancy essay and continued to scratch away with her quill. Harry watched her with his mind a long way away.

"Hang on a moment," he said slowly. "I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes?"

"And when has anyone ever paid attention to what Filch has banned?" asked Hermione, still concentrating on her essay.

"But I thought all the owls were being searched. So how come these grills are able to bring love potions into the school?"

"Fred and George send them disguised as perfumes and cough potions," said Hermione. "It's part of their Owl order service."

"You know a lot about it."

Hermione gave him the kind of nasty look she had just given his copy of Advanced Potion-Making.

"It was all on the back of the bottles they showed Ginny and me in the summer," she said coldly, "I don't go around putting potions in people's drinks... or pretending to eat her, which is just as bad..."

"Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry quickly. "The point is, Filch is being fooled isn't he? These girls are getting stuff into the school disguised as something else! So why couldn't Malfoy have brought the necklace into the school --?"

"Oh, Harry... not that again..."

"Come on, why not?" demanded Harry.

"Look , " sighed Hermione, "Secrecy Sensors detect jinxes, curses, and concealment charms, don't they? They're used to find dark magic and dark objects. They'd have picked up a powerful curse , like the one in the necklace, within seconds. But something that's just been put in the wrong bottle wouldn't register -- anyway Love potions aren't dark or dangerous -"

"Easy for you to say," muttered Harry, thinking of Romilda Vane.

-- so it would be down to Filch to realise it wasn't a cough potion, and he's not a very good wizard, I doubt he can tell one potion from --"

Hermione stopped dead; Harry had heard it too. Somebody had moved close behind them among the dark bookshelves. They waited, and a moment later the vulturelike countenance of Madam Pince appeared around the corner, her sunken cheeks, her skin like parchment, and her long hooked nose illuminated unflatteringly by the lamp she was carrying.

"The library is now closed," she said, "Mind you return anything you have borrowed to the correct -- what have you been doing to that book, you depraved boy?"

"It isn't the library's, it's mine!" said Harry hastily, snatching his copy of Advanced Potion-Making off the table as she lunged at it with a clawlike hand.

"Spoiled!" she hissed . "Desecrated, befouled !"

"It's just a book that's been written on!" said Harry, tugging it out of her grip.

She looked as though she might have a seizure; Hermione, who had hastily packed her things, grabbed Harry by the arm and frogmarched him away.

"She'll ban you from the library if you're not careful. Why did you have to bring that stupid book?"

"It's not my fault she's barking mad, Hermione. Or d'you think she overheard you being rude about Filch? I've always thought there might be something between them..."

"Oh, ha ha.."

Enjoying the fact that they could speak normally again, they made their way along the deserted lamp-lit corridors back to the common room, arguing whether or not Filch and Madam Pince were secretly in love with each other.

"Baubles" said Harry to the Fat Lady, this being the new, festive password.

"Same to you," said the fat lady with a roguish grin, and she swung forward to admit them.

"Hi, Harry!" said Romilda Vane, the moment he had climbed through the portrait hole. "Fancy a gillywater?"

Hermione gave him a "what-did-I-tell-you?" look over her shoulder.

"No thanks," said Harry quickly. "I don't like it much."

"Well, take these anyway," said Romilda, thrusting a box into his hands. "Chocolate Cauldrons, they've got firewhiskey in them. My gran sent them to me, but I don't like them."

"Oh-- right -- thanks a lot." said Harry, who could not think what else to say. "Er-- I ' m just going over here with ..."

He hurried off behind Hermione, his voice tailing away feebly.

"Told you," said Hermione succinctly, " Sooner you ask someone, sooner they'll all leave you alone and you can --"

But her face suddnly turned blank; she had just spotted Ron and Lavender, who were i ntertwined in the same armchair.

"Well, good night, Harry" said Hermione, though it was only seven o'clock in the evening, and she left for the girl s' dormitory without another word.

Harry went to bed comforting himself that there was only one more day of lessons to struggle through, plus Slughorn's party, after which he and Ron would depart together for the B urrow. It now seemed impossible that Ron and Hermione would make up with each other before the holidays began, but

perhaps, somehow, the break would give them time to calm down, think better of their behavior...

But his hopes were not high, and they sank still lower after enduring a Transfiguration lesson with them both next day. They had just embarked upon the immensely difficult topic of human transfiguration; working in front of mirrors, they were supposed to be changing the color of their own eyebrows. Hermione laughed unkindly at Ron's disastrous first attempt, during which he somehow managed to give himself a spectacular handlebar mustache; Ron retaliated by doing a cruel but accurate impression of Hermione jumping up and down in her seat every time Professor McGonagall asked a question, which Lavender and Parvati found deeply amusing and which reduced Hermione to the verge of tears again. She raced out of the classroom on the bell, leaving half her things behind; Harry, deciding that her need was greater than Ron's just now, scooped up her remaining possessions and followed her.

He finally tracked her down as she emerged from a girl's bathroom on the floor below. She was accompanied by Luna Lovegood, who was patting her vaguely on the back.

"Oh, hello, Harry," said Luna. "Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna. Hermione, you left your stuff..."

He held out her books.

"Oh, yes," said Hermione in a choked voice, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide the fact she was wiping her eyes with her pencil case. "Thank you , Harry. Well, I'd better get going..."

And she hurried off, without ever giving Harry any time to offer words of comfort, though admittedly he could not think of any.

"She's a bit upset , " said Luna. "I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She said something about Ron Weasley..."

"Yeah, they've had a row," said Harry.

"He says funny things sometimes, doesn't he?" said Luna as they set off down the corridor together. "But he can be a bit unkind. I noticed that last year."

" I s'pose , " said Harry. Luna was demonstrating her usual knack of speaking uncomfortable truths; he had never met anyone quite like her. "So have you had a good term?"

"Oh, it's been al l right," said Luna. " A bit lonely without the D.A. Ginny's been nice, though. She stopped two boys in our Transfiguration class calling me 'Loony' the other day --"

"How would you like to come to S lughorn's party with me tonight?"

The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could stop them; he heard himself say them as though it were a stranger speaking.

Luna turned her protuberant eyes to him in surprise.

"Slughorn's party? With you?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "We're supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like.. I mean..." He was keen to make his intentions perfectly clear. " I mean, just as friends, you know. But if you don't want to..."

He was already half hoping that she didn't want to.

"O h no, I'd love to go with you as friends!" said Luna, beaming as he had never seen her beam before. "Nobody's ever asked me to a party before, as a friend! Is that why you dyed your eyebrow, for the party? Should I dye mine too?"

"No" said Harry firmly, "That was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me. So I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eight o'clock then . "

"AHA!" screamed a voice from overhead and both of them jumped; unnoticed by either of them, they had just passed underneath Peeves, who was hanging upside down from a chandelier and grinning maliciously at them.

"Potty asked Loony to go to the party ! Potty loves Loony! Potty
luuuuurves Looooony!"

And he zoomed away cackling and shrieking, "Potty loves Loony!"

"Nice to keep these things private," said Harry. And sure enough, in no time at all the whole school seemed to know that Harry Potter was taking Luna Lovegood to Slughorn's party.

"You could've taken anyone!" said Ron in disbelief over dinner. "Anyone! And you chose Loony Lovegood?"

"Don't call her that, Ron!" snapped Ginny, pausing behind Harry on her way to join friends. "I'm really glad you're taking her Harry, she's so excited."

And she moved on down the table to sit with Dean. Harry tried to feel pleased that Ginny was glad he was taking Luna to the party but could not quite manage it. A long way along the table Hermione was sitting alone, playing with her stew. Harry noticed Ron looking at her furtively.

"You could say sorry , " suggested Harry bluntly.

"What , and get attacked by another flock of canaries?" muttered Ron.

"What did you have to imitate her for?"

"She laughed at my mustache!"

"So did I, it was the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

But Ron did not seem to have heard; Lavender had just arrived with Parvati. Squeezing herself in between Harry and Ron, Lavender flung her arms around Ron's neck.

"Hi, Harry," said Parvati who, like Harry, looked faintly embarrassed and bored by the behavior of their two friends.

"Hi," said Harry, "How're you? You're staying at Hogwarts, then? I heard your parents wanted you to leave."

"I managed to talk them out of it for the time being," said Parvati. "That Katie thing really freaked them out, but as there hasn't been anything since... Oh, hi, Hermione!"

Parvati positively beamed. Harry could tell that she was feeling guilty for having laughed at Hermione in Transfiguration. He looked around and saw that Hermione was beaming back, if possible even more brightly. Girls were very strange sometimes.

"Hi, Parvati!" said Hermione, ignoring Ron and Lavender completely. "Are you going to Slughorn's party tonight?"

"No invite," said Parvati gloomily. "I'd love to go, though, it sounds like it's going to be really good... You're going, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting Cormac at eight, and we're -"

There was a noise like a plunger being withdrawn from a blocked sink , and Ron surfaced. Hermione acted as though she had not seen or heard anything.

"- we're going up to the party together."

"Cormac?" said Parvati. "Cormac McLaggen, you mean?"

"That's right," said Hermione sweetly. "The one who *almost*" - she put a great deal of emphasis on the word - "bec a me Gryffindor Keeper."

"Are you going out with him, then?" asked Parvati, wide-eyed.

"Oh - yes - didn't you know?" said Harmione, with a most un-Hermione-ish giggle.

"No!" said Parvati, looking positively agog at thi s piece of gossip. "Wow , you like your Quidditch players, don't you? First Krum, then McLaggen."

"I like *really good* Quidditch players," Hermione corrected her, still smiling. "Well, see you... Got to go and get ready for the party..."

She left. At once Lavender and Parvati put their heads together to discuss this new development, with everything they had ever heard about McLaggen, and all they had ever guessed about Hermione. Ron looked strangely blank and said nothing. Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which girls would sink to get revenge.

When he arrived in the entrance hall at eight o'clock that night, he found an unusually large number of girls lurking there, all of whom seemed to be staring at him resentfully as he approached Luna. She was wearing a set of spangled silver robes that were attracting a certain amount of giggles from the onlookers, but otherwise she looked quite nice. Harry was glad, in any case, that she had left off her radish earrings, her butterbeer cork necklace, and her Spectrespecs.

"Hi," he said. "Shall we get going then?"

"Oh yes," she said happily. "Where is the party?"

"Slughorn's office," said Harry, leading her up the marble staircase away from all the staring and muttering. "Did you hear, there's supposed to be a vampire coming?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour?" asked Luna.

"I - what?" said Harry, disconcerted. "You mean the Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, he's a vampire," said Luna matter-of-factly. "Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took over from Cornelius Fudge, but he was forced not to publish by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn't want the truth to get out!"

Harry, who thought it most unlikely that Rufus Scrimgeour was a vampire, but who was used to Luna repeating her father's bizarre views as though they were fact, did not reply; they were already approaching Slughorn's office and the sounds of laughter, music, and loud conversation were growing louder with every step they took.

Whether it had been built that way, or because he had used magical trickery to make it so, Slughorn's office was much larger than the usual teacher's study. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson, and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in the red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like little roving tables.

"Harry, m'boy!" boomed Slughorn, almost as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed in through the door. "Come in, come in, so many people I'd like you to meet!"

Slughorn was wearing a tasseled velvet hat to match his smoking jacket. Gripping Harry's arm so tightly he might have been hoping to Disapparate with him, Slughorn led him purposefully into the party; Harry seized Luna's hand and dragged her along with him.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Eldred Worples, an old student of mine, author of 'Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires' - and, of course, his friend Sanguini."

Worples, who was a small, stout, bespectacled man, grabbed Harry's hand and shook it enthusiastically; the vampire Sanguini, who was tall and emaciated with dark shadows under his eyes, merely nodded. He looked rather bored. A gaggle of girls was standing close to him, looking curious and excited.

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" said Worples, peering shortsightedly up into Harry's face. "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, 'Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?'"

"Er," said Harry, "were you?"

"Just as modest as Horace described!" said Worples. "But seriously" — his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike — "I would be delighted to write it myself— people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in

four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn't quite — Sanguini, stay here!" added Worple, suddenly stern, for the vampire had been edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eye. "Here, have a pasty," said Worple, seizing one from a passing elf and stuffing it into Sanguini's hand before turning his attention back to Harry. "My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —"

"I'm definitely not interested," said Harry firmly, "and I've just seen a friend of mine, sorry." He pulled Luna after him into the crowd; he had indeed just seen a long mane of brown hair disappear between what looked like two members of the Weird Sisters.

"Hermione! Hermione !"

"Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna !"

"What's happened to you?" asked Harry, for Hermione looked distinctly disheveled, rather as though she had just fought her way out of a thicket of Devil's Snare.

"Oh, I've just escaped — I mean, I've just left Cormac," she said. "Under the mistletoe," she added in explanation, as Harry continued to look questioningly at her.

"Serves you right for coming with him," he told her severely. "I thought he'd annoy Ron most," said Hermione dispassionately. "I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith, but I thought, on the whole —"

"You considered Smith?" said Harry, revoked.

"Yes, I did, and I'm starting to wish I'd chosen him, McLaggen makes Grawp look a gentleman. Let's go this way, we'll be able to see him coming, he's so tall. . . ." The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, scooping up goblets of mead on the way, realizing too late that Professor Trelawney was standing there alone.

"Hello," said Luna politely to Professor Trelawney.

"Good evening, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, focusing upon Luna with some difficulty. Harry could smell cooking sherry again. "I haven't seen you in my classes lately. . ."

"No, I've got Firenze this year," said Luna.

"Oh, of course," said Professor Trelawney with an angry, drunken titter. "Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought, would you not, that now I am returned to the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no ... we share classes. . . . It's an insult, frankly, an

insult. Do you know. . ." Professor Trelawney seemed too tipsy to have recognized Harry.

Under cover of her furious criticisms of Firenze, Harry drew closer to Hermione and said, "Let ' s get something straight. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'd stoop that low?"

Harry looked at her shrewdly. "Hermione, if you can ask Ollivander —"

"There's a difference," said Hermione with dignity. "I've got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, have happened at Keeper tryouts."

"Good," said Harry fervently. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match —"

"Quidditch!" said Hermione angrily. "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me one single question about myself, no, I've just been treated to 'A Hundred Great Saves Made by Cormac McLaggen' nonstop ever since — oh no, here he comes!" She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated; one moment she was there, the next, she had squeezed between two guffawing witches and vanished.

"Seen Hermione?" asked McLaggen, forcing his way through the throng a minute later.

"No, sorry," said Harry, and he turned quickly to join in Luna's conversation, forgetting for a split second to whom she was talking.

"Harry Potter!" said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

"Oh, hello," said Harry unenthusiastically.

"My dear boy!" she said in a very carrying whisper. "The rumors! The stories! 'The Chosen One'! Of course, I have known for a very long time. . . . The omens were never good, Harry. . . But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!"

"Ah, Sybil, we all think our subject's most important!" said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney's other side, his face very red, his velvet hat a little askew, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. "But I don't think I've ever known such a natural at Potions!" said Slughorn, regarding Harry with a fond, if bloodshot, eye. "Instinctive, you know — like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybil — why even Severus —" And to Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them. "Stop skulking and come and

join us, Severus!" hiccuped Slughorn happily. "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional po-tion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!"

Trapped, with Slughorn's arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed. "Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, it's natural ability!" shouted Slughorn. "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you, Severus —"

"Really?" said Snape quietly, his eyes still boring into Harry, who felt a certain disquiet. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to start investigating the source of his newfound brilliance at Potions.

"Remind me what other subjects you're taking, Harry?" asked Slughorn .

"Defense Against the D ark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration , Herbology..."

"All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror ," said Snap e with the faintest sneer.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do," said Harry defiantly.

"And a great one you'll make too!" boomed Slughorn.

"I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," said Luna unexpectedly. Everybody looked at her. "The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They're planning to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease."

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started to laugh. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. Emerging, from his goblet, coughing, sopping wet but still grinning, he saw something calculated to raise his spirits even higher: Draco Malfoy being dragged by the ear toward them by Argus Filch.

"Professor Slughorn," wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes, "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filch's grip, looking furious. "All right, I wasn't invited!" he said angrily. "I was trying to gate crash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" said Filch, a statement at complete odds with the glee on his face. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the headmaster say that nighttime prowling 's out, unless you've got permission, didn't he, eh?"

"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," said Slughorn, waving it all off. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we'll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco."

Filch's expression of outraged disappointment was perfectly predictable; but why, Harry wondered, watching him, did Malfoy look almost equally unhappy? And why was Snape looking at Malfoy as though both angry and . . . was it possible? ... a little afraid? But almost before Harry had registered what he had seen, Filch had turned and shuffled away, muttering under his breath; Malfoy had composed his face into a smile and was thanking Slughorn for his generosity, and Snape's face was smoothly inscrutable again.

"It's nothing, nothing," said Slughorn, waving away Malfoy's thanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all...."

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," said Malfoy quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known. ..."

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was not the sucking-up that intrigued him; he had watched Malfoy do that to Snape for a long time. It was the fact that Malfoy did, after all, look a little ill. This was the first time he had seen Malfoy close up for ages; he now saw that Malfoy had dark shadows under his eyes and a distinctly grayish tinge to his skin.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Now, Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard —"

"I am his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or other-wise, to be," said Snape curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful. Harry stood there for a moment, irresolute, then said, "I'll be back in a bit, Luna — er — bathroom."

"All right," she said cheerfully, and he thought he heard her, as he hurried off into the crowd, resume the subject of the Rotfang Conspiracy with Professor Trelawney, who seemed sincerely interested. It was easy, once out of the party, to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself, for the corridor was quite deserted. What was more difficult was finding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and loud talk still issuing from Slughorn's office behind him. Perhaps Snape had taken Malfoy to his office in the dungeons ... or perhaps he was escorting him back to the Slytherin common room. . . . Harry pressed his ear against door after door as he dashed down the corridor until, with a great jolt of excitement, he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor and heard voices.

". . . cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled —"

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?"

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it."

"Who suspects me?" said Malfoy angrily. "For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must 've had an enemy no one knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're do-ing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work — I can stop you!"

There was a pause and then Snape said quietly, "Ah . . . Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?"

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in !" Harry pressed his ear still more closely against the keyhole. . . . What had happened to make Malfoy speak to Snape like this — Snape, toward whom he had always shown respect, even liking?

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco —"

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!" jeered Malfoy.

There was another pause. Then Snape said, "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things ."

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me," said Snape, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear very hard against the keyhole to hear. "I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —"

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me and I'm doing it, I've got a plan and it's going to work, it's just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!"

"What is your plan ?"

"It's none of your business !"

" If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you ..."

"I have all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the ex-treme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes —"

"I would've had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn't put them in detention!"

"Keep your voice down!" spat Snape, for Malfoy 's voice had risen excitedly. "If your friends Crabbe and Goyle intend to pass their Defense Against the Dark Arts OWL this time around, they will need to work a little harder than they are doing at pres —"

"What does it matter?" said Malfoy. "Defense Against the Dark Arts — its all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need pro-TECTING against the Dark Arts —"

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" said Snape. "Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me! You are being incautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle —"

"They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can —"

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father's capture and imprisonment has upset you, but —"

Harry had barely a second's warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open. Malfoy was striding away down the corridor, past the open door of Slughorn's office, around the distant corner, and out of sight. Hardly daring to breathe, Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom. His expression unfathomable, he returned to the party. Harry remained on the floor, hidden beneath the cloak, his mind racing.

Chapter 16: A Very Frosty Christmas

"So Snape was offering to help him? He was definitely offering to help him?"

"If you ask that once more," said Harry, "I'm going to stick this sprout —"

"I'm only checking!" said Ron. They were standing alone at the Burrow's kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for Mrs. Weasley. Snow was drifting past the window in front of them.

"Yes, Snape was offering to help him!" said Harry. "He said he'd promised Malfoy's mother to protect him, that he'd made an Un-breakable Oath or something —"

"An Unbreakable Vow?" said Ron, looking stunned. "Nah, he can't have. . . . Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Harry. "Why, what does it mean?"

"Well, you can't break an Unbreakable Vow. . . ."

"I'd worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?"

"You die," said Ron simply. "Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us. He went mental," said Ron, with a reminiscent gleam in his eyes. "Only time I've ever seen Dad as angry as Mum, Fred reckons his left but-tock has never been the same since."

"Yeah, well, passing over Fred's left buttock —"

"I beg your pardon?" said Fred's voice as the twins entered the kitchen.

"Aaah, George, look at this. They're using knives and everything. Bless them."

"I'll be seventeen in two and a bit months' time," said Ron grumpily, "and then I'll be able to do it by magic!"

"But meanwhile," said George, sitting down at the kitchen table and putting his feet up on it, "we can enjoy watching you demon-strate the correct use of a — whoops-a-daisy!"

"You made me do that!" said Ron angrily, sucking his cut thumb. "You wait, when I'm seventeen —"

"I'm sure you'll dazzle us all with hitherto unsuspected magical skills," yawned Fred.

"And speaking of hitherto unsuspected skills, Ronald," said George, "what is this we hear from Ginny about you and a young lady called — unless our information is faulty — Lavender Brown?"

Ron turned a little pink, but did not look displeased as he turned back to the sprouts. "Mind your own business."

"What a snappy retort," said Fred. "I really don't know how you think of them. No, what we wanted to know was... how did it happen?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Did she have an accident or something?"

"What?" ..!;

"Well, how did she sustain such extensive brain damage? Care-ful, now!"

Mrs. Weasley entered the room just in time to see Ron throw the sprout knife at Fred, who had turned it into a paper airplane with one lazy flick of his wand,

"Ron!" she said furiously. "Don't you ever let me see you throw-ing knives again!"

"I wont," said Ron, "let you see," he added under his breath, as he turned back to the sprout mountain.

"Fred, George, I'm sorry, dears, but Remus is arriving tonight, so Bill will have to squeeze in with you two." ;

"No problem," said George.

- "Then, as Charlie isn't coming home, that just leaves Harry and ;!/ Ron in the attic, and if Fleur shares with Ginny —" "— that'll make Ginny's Christmas —" muttered Fred. "— everyone should be comfortable. Well, they'll have a bed, anyway," said Mrs. Weasley, sounding slightly harassed.

"Percy definitely not showing his ugly face, then?" asked Fred. Mrs. Weasley turned away before she answered. "No, he's busy, I expect, at the Ministry."

"Or he's the world's biggest prat," said Fred, as Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen. "One of the two. "Well, let's get going, then, George."

"What are you two up to?" asked Ron. "Cant you help us with these sprouts? You could just use your wand and then we'll be free too!"

"No, I don't think we can do that," said Fred seriously. "It's very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic, makes you appreciate how difficult it is for Muggles and Squibs —" "— and if you want people to help you, Ron," added George, throwing the paper airplane at him, "I wouldn't chuck knives at them. Just a little hint. We're off to the village, there's a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are some-thing marvelous . . . , almost like real magic. ..."

"Gits," said Ron darkly, watching Fred and George setting off across the snowy yard. "Would've only taken them ten seconds and then we could've gone too."

"I couldn't," said Harry. "I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't wander off while I'm staying here."

"Oh yeah," said Ron. He peeled a few more sprouts and then said, "Are you going to tell Dumbledore what you heard Snape and Malfoy saying to each other?"

"Yep," said Harry. "I'm going to tell anyone who can put a stop to it, and Dumbledore's top of the list. I might have another word with your dad too."

"Pity you didn't hear what Malfoy's actually doing, though." "I couldn't have done, could I? That was the whole point, he was refusing to tell Snape."

There was silence for a moment or two, then Ron said, " 'Course, you know what they'll all say? Dad and Dumbledore and all of them? They'll say Snape isn't really trying to help Malfoy, he was just trying to find out what Malfoy's up to."

"They didn't hear him," said Harry flatly. "No one's that good an actor, not even Snape."

"Yeah . . . I'm just saying, though/" said Ron.

Harry turned to face him, frowning. "You think I'm right, though?" ,

"Yeah, I do!" said Ron hastily. "Seriously, I do! But they're all convinced Snape's in the Order, aren't they?"

Harry said nothing. It had already occurred to him that this would be the most likely objection to his new evidence; he could hear Hermione now: Obviously, Harry, he was pretending to offer help so he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing. . . .

This was pure imagination, however, as he had had no opportunity to tell Hermione what he had overheard. She had disappeared from Slughorn's

party before he returned to it, or so he had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and she had already gone to bed by the time he returned to the common room. As he and Ron had left for the Burrow early the next day, he had barely had time to wish her a happy Christmas and to tell her that he had some very important news when they got back from the holidays. He was not entirely sure that she had heard him, though; Ron and Lavender had been saying a thoroughly nonverbal good-bye just behind him at the time.

Still, even Hermione would not be able to deny one thing: Malfoy was definitely up to something, and Snape knew it, so Harry felt fully justified in saying "I told you so," which he had done several times to Ron already.

Harry did not get the chance to speak to Mr. Weasley, who was working very long hours at the Ministry, until Christmas Eve night. The Weasleys and their guests were sitting in the living room, which Ginny had decorated so lavishly that it was rather like sitting in a paper-chain explosion. Fred, George, Harry, and Ron were the only ones who knew that the angel on top of the tree was actually a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle as he pulled up carrots for Christmas dinner. Stupefied, painted gold, stuffed into a miniature tutu and with small wings glued to its back, it glowered down at them all, the ugliest angel Harry had ever seen, with a large bald head like a potato and rather hairy feet.

They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast by Mrs. Weasley's favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck, whose voice was warbling out of the large wooden wireless set. Fleur, who seemed to find Celestina very dull, was talking so loudly in the corner that a scowling Mrs. Weasley kept

pointing her wand at the volume control, so that Celestina grew louder and louder. Under cover of a particularly jazzy number called "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," Fred and George started a game of Exploding Snap with Ginny. Ron kept shooting Bill and Fleur covert looks, as though hoping to pick up tips. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin, who was thinner and more ragged-looking than ever, was sitting beside the fire, staring into its depths as though he could not hear Celestina's voice.

Oh, come and stir my cauldron,

And if you do it right,

I'll boil you up some hot strong love

To keep you warm tonight.

"We danced to this when we were eighteen!" said Mrs. Weasley, wiping her eyes on her knitting. "Do you remember, Arthur?"

"Mphf?" said Mr. Weasley, whose head had been nodding over the satsuma he was peeling. "Oh yes ... marvelous tune . . ."

With an effort, he sat up a little straighter and looked around at Harry, who was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about this," he said, jerking his head toward the wireless as Celestina broke into the chorus. "Be over soon."

"No problem," said Harry, grinning. "Has it been busy at the Ministry?"

"Very," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't mind if we were getting anywhere, but of the three arrests we've made in the last couple of months, I doubt that one of them is a genuine Death Eater — only don't repeat that, Harry," he added quickly, looking much more awake all of a sudden.

"They're not still holding Stan Shunpike, are they?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Weasley. "I know Dumbledore's tried appealing directly to Scrimgeour about Stan. ... I mean, anybody who has actually interviewed him agrees that he's about as much a Death Eater as this satsuma . . . but the top levels want to look as though they're making some progress, and 'three arrests' sounds better than 'three mistaken arrests and releases'. . . but again, this is

all top secret. . . ."

"I won't say anything," said Harry. He hesitated for a moment, wondering how best to embark on what he wanted to say; as he marshaled his thoughts, Celestina Warbeck began a ballad called "You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me."

"Mr. Weasley, you know what I told you at the station when we were setting off for school?"

"I checked, Harry," said Mr. Weasley at once. "I went and searched the Malfoys' house. There was nothing, either broken or whole, that shouldn't have been there."

"Yeah, I know, I saw in the Prophet that you'd looked . . . but this is something different. . . . Well, something more ..."

And he told Mr. Weasley everything he had overheard between

Malfoy and Snape, As Harry spoke, he saw Lupin's head turn a little toward him, taking in every word. When he had finished, there was silence, except for Celestina's crooning.

Oh, my poor heart, where has it gone? It's left me for a spell...

"Has it occurred to you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, "that Snape was simply pretending — ?"

"Pretending to offer help, so that he could find out what Malfoy's up to?" said Harry quickly. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. But how do we know?"

"It isn't our business to know," said Lupin unexpectedly. He had turned his back on the fire now and faced Harry across Mr. Weasley. "It's Dumbledore's business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us."

"But," said Harry, "just say — just say Dumbledores wrong about Snape —"

"People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore's judgment. I do; therefore, I trust Severus."

"But Dumbledore can make mistakes," argued Harry. "He says it himself. And you" — he looked Lupin straight in the eye — "do you honestly like Snape?"

"I neither like nor dislike Severus," said Lupin. "No, Harry, I am speaking the truth," he added, as Harry pulled a skeptical expression. "We shall never be bosom friends, perhaps; after all that happened between James and Sirius and Severus, there is too much bitterness there. But I do not forget that during the year I taught at Hogwarts, Severus made the Wolfsbane Potion for me every month, made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usually do at the full moon."

"But he 'accidentally' let it slip that you're a werewolf, so you had to leave!" said Harry angrily.

Lupin shrugged. "The news would have leaked out anyway. We both know he wanted my job, but he could have wreaked much worse damage on me by tampering with the potion. He kept me healthy. I must be grateful."

"Maybe he didn't dare mess with the potion with Dumbledore watching him!" said Harry.

"You are determined to hate him, Harry," said Lupin with a faint smile. "And I understand; with James as your father, with Sir-ius as your godfather, you have inherited an old prejudice. By all means tell Dumbledore what you have told Arthur and me, but do not expect him to share your view of the matter; do not even expect him to be surprised by what you tell him. It might have been on Dumbledore's orders that Severus questioned Draco." ;

. . . and now you've torn it quite apart I'll thank you to give back my heart!

Celestina ended her song on a very long, high-pitched note and loud applause issued out of the wireless, which Mrs. Weasley joined in with enthusiastically.

"Eez eet over?" said Fleur loudly. "Thank goodness, what an 'orrible —"

"Shall we have a nightcap, then?" asked Mr. Weasley loudly, leaping to his feet. "Who wants eggnog?"

"What have you been up to lately?" Harry asked Lupin, as Mr. Weasley bustled off to fetch the eggnog, and everybody else stretched and broke into conversation.

"Oh, I've been underground," said Lupin. "Almost literally. That's why I haven't been able to write, Harry; sending letters to you would have been something of a giveaway." -:

"What do you mean?"

"I've been living among my fellows, my equals," said Lupin. "Werewolves," he added, at Harry's look of incomprehension. "Nearly all of them are on Voldemort's side. Dumbledore wanted a spy and here I was . . . ready-made."

He sounded a little bitter, and perhaps realized it, for he smiled more warmly as he went on, "I am not complaining; it is necessary work and who can do it better than I? However, it has been difficult gaining their trust. I bear the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards, you see, whereas they have shunned normal society and live on the margins, stealing — and sometimes killing — to eat."

"How come they like Voldemort?"

"They think that, under his rule, they will have a better life," said Lupin. "And it is hard to argue with Greyback out there. . . ."

"Who's Greyback?"

"You haven't heard of him?" Lupin's hands closed convulsively in his lap. "Fenrir Greyback is, perhaps, the most savage werewolf alive today. He regards it as his mission in life to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizards. Voldemort has promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback specializes in children. . . . Bite them young, he says, and raise them away

from their parents, raise them to hate normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him upon people's sons and daughters; it is a threat that usually produces good results."

Lupin paused and then said, "It was Greyback who bit me." "What?" said Harry, astonished. "When — when you were a kid, you mean?"

"Yes. My father had offended him. I did not know, for a very long time, the identity of the werewolf who had attacked me; I even felt pity for him, thinking that he had had no control, knowing by then how it felt to transform. But Greyback is not like that. At the full moon, he positions himself close to victims, ensuring that he is near enough to strike. He plans it all. And this is the man Voldemort is using to marshal the werewolves. I cannot pretend that my particular brand of reasoned argument is making much headway against Greyback's insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people." "But you are normal!" said Harry fiercely. "You've just got a — a

problem —"

Lupin burst out laughing. "Sometimes you remind me a lot of James. He called it my 'furry little problem in company. Many people were under the impression that I owned a badly behaved

rabbit."

He accepted a glass of eggnog from Mr. Weasley with a word of thanks, looking slightly more cheerful, Harry, meanwhile, felt a rush of excitement: This last mention of his father had reminded him that there was something he had been looking forward to asking Lupin.

"Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?"

"The Half-Blood what?"

"Prince," said Harry, watching him closely for signs of recognition.

"There are no Wizarding princes," said Lupin, now smiling. "Is this a title you're thinking of adopting? I should have thought being 'the Chosen One' would be enough."

"It's nothing to do with me!" said Harry indignantly. "The Half-Blood Prince is someone who used to go to Hogwarts, I've got his old Potions book. He wrote spells all over it, spells he invented. One of them was Levicorpus —"

"Oh, that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts," said Lupin reminiscently. "There were a few months in my fifth year when you couldn't move for being hoisted into the air by your ankle."

"My dad used it," said Harry. "I saw him in the Pensieve, he used it on Snape."

He tried to sound casual, as though this was a throwaway comment of no real importance, but he was not sure he had achieved the right effect; Lupin's smile was a little too understanding.

"Yes," he said, "but he wasn't the only one. As I say, it was very popular. . . . You know how these spells come and go. . . ."

"But it sounds like it was invented while you were at school," Harry persisted.

"Not necessarily," said Lupin. "Jinxes go in and out of fashion like everything else."

He looked into Harry's face and then said quietly, "James was a pureblood, Harry, and I promise you, he never asked us to call him 'Prince.'"

Abandoning pretense, Harry said, "And it wasn't Sirius? Or you?"

"Definitely not."

"Oh." Harry stared into the fire. "I just thought — well, he's helped me out a lot in Potions classes, the Prince has."

"How old is this book, Harry?"

"I dunno, I've never checked."

"Well, perhaps that will give you some clue as to when the Prince was at Hogwarts," said Lupin.

Shortly after this, Fleur decided to imitate Celestina singing "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," which was taken by everyone, once they had glimpsed Mrs. Weasley's expression, to be the cue to go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron's attic bedroom, where a camp bed had been added for Harry.

Ron fell asleep almost immediately, but Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of Advanced Potion-Making before getting into bed. There he turned its pages, searching, until he finally found, at the front of the book, the date that it had been published. It was nearly fifty years old. Neither his father, nor his father's friends, had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago. Feeling disappointed, Harry threw the book back into his trunk, turned off the lamp, and rolled over, thinking of werewolves and Snape, Stan Shunpike and the Half-Blood Prince, and finally falling into an uneasy sleep full of creeping shadows and the cries of bitten children. . . .

"She's got to be joking. . . ."

Harry woke with a start to find a bulging stocking lying over the end of his bed. He put on his glasses and looked around; the tiny window was almost completely obscured with snow and, in front of it, Ron was sitting bolt upright in bed and examining what appeared to be a thick gold chain.

"What's chat?" asked Harry. '

"It's from Lavender," said Ron, sounding revolted^ "She earned
honestly think I'd wear ..."

Harry looked more closely and let out a shout of laughter, Dan
gling from the chain in large gold letters were the words:

“My sweetheart”

"Nice," he said. "Classy. You should definitely wear it in front of Fred
and George."

"If you tell them," said Ron, shoving the necklace out of sight under his
pillow, "I — I — I'll —"

"Stutter at me?" said Harry, grinning. "Come on, would I?"

"How could she think I'd like something like that, though?" Ron
demanded of thin air, looking rather shocked.

"Well, think back," said Harry. "Have you ever let it slip that you'd like to go out in public with the words 'My Sweetheart' round your neck?"

"Well... we don't really talk much," said Ron. "It's mainly . . ."

"Snogging," said Harry.

"Well, yeah," said Ron. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Is Hermione really going out with McLaggen?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "They were at Slughorn's party together, but I don't think it went that well."

Ron looked slightly more cheerful as he delved deeper into his stocking.

Harry's presents included a sweater with a large Golden Snitch worked onto the front, hand-knitted by Mrs. Weasley, a large box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products from the twins, and a slightly damp, moldy-smelling package that came with a label reading To Master, From Kreacher,

Harry stared at it. "D'you reckon this is safe to open?" he asked. "Can't be anything dangerous, all our mail's still being searched at the Ministry," replied Ron, though he was eyeing the parcel suspiciously.

"I didn't think of giving Kreacher anything. Do people usually give their house-elves Christmas presents?" asked Harry, prodding the parcel cautiously.

"Hermione would," said Ron. "But let's wait and see what it is before you start feeling guilty."

A moment later, Harry had given a loud yell and leapt out of his camp bed; the package contained a large number of maggots. "Nice," said Ron, roaring with laughter. "Very thoughtful." "I'd rather have them than that necklace," said Harry, which sobered Ron up at once.

Everybody was wearing new sweaters when they all sat down for Christmas lunch, everyone except Fleur (on whom, it appeared, Mrs. Weasley had not wanted to waste one) and Mrs. Weasley herself, who was sporting a brand-new midnight blue witch's hat glittering with what looked like tiny starlike diamonds, and a spec-tacular golden necklace.

"Fred and George gave them to me! Aren't they beautiful?" ∴ "Well, we find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we're washing our own socks," said George, waving an airy hand. "Parsnips, Remus?"

"Harry, you've got a maggot in your hair," said Ginny cheerfully, leaning across the table to pick it out; Harry felt goose bumps erupt up his neck that had nothing to do with the maggot.

"Ow 'orrible," said Fleur, with an affected little shudder.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Ron. "Gravy, Fleur?"

. In his eagerness to help her, he knocked the gravy boat flying; Bill waved his wand and the gravy soared up in the air and returned meekly to the boat.

"You are as bad as zat Tonks," said Fleur to Ron, when she had finished kissing Bill in thanks. "She is always knocking —"

"I invited dear Tonks to come along today," said Mrs. Weasley, setting down the carrots with unnecessary force and glaring at Fleur. "But she wouldn't come. Have you spoken to her lately, Remus?"

"No, I haven't been in contact with anybody very much," said Lupin. "But Tonks has got her own family to go to, hasn't she?"

"Hmmm," said Mrs. Weasley. "Maybe. I got the impression she was planning to spend Christmas alone, actually."

She gave Lupin an annoyed look, as though it was all his fault she was getting Fleur for a daughter-in-law instead of Tonks, but Harry, glancing across at Fleur, who was now feeding Bill bits of turkey off her own fork, thought that Mrs. Weasley was fighting a long-lost battle. He was, however, reminded of a question he had with regard to Tonks, and who better to ask than Lupin, the man who knew all about Patronuses?

"Tonks's Patronus has changed its form," he told him. "Snape said so anyway. I didn't know that could happen. Why would your Patronus change?"

Lupin took his time chewing his turkey and swallowing before saying slowly, "Sometimes ... a great shock ... an emotional up-heaval ..."

"It looked big, and it had four legs," said Harry, struck by a sudden thought and lowering his voice. "Hey ... it couldn't be — ?"

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley suddenly. She had risen from her chair; her hand was pressed over her heart and she was staring out of the kitchen window. "Arthur — it's Percy!"

"What?"

Mr. Weasley looked around. Everybody looked quickly at the window; Ginny stood up for a better look. There, sure enough, was Percy Weasley, striding across the snowy yard, his horn-rimmed glasses glinting in the sunlight. He was not, however, alone.

"Arthur, he's — he's with the Minister!"

And sure enough, the man Harry had seen in the Daily Prophet was following along in Percy's wake, limping slightly, his mane of graying hair and his black cloak flecked with snow. Before any of them could say anything, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do more than exchange stunned looks, the back door opened and there stood Percy.

There was a moment's painful silence. Then Percy said rather stiffly, "Merry Christmas, Mother."

"Oh, Percy!" said Mrs. Weasley, and she threw herself into his arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour paused in the doorway, leaning on his walk-ing stick and smiling as he observed this affecting scene.

"You must forgive this intrusion," he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. "Percy and I were in the vicinity — working, you know — and he couldn't re-sist dropping in and seeing you all."

But Percy showed no sign of wanting to greet any of the rest of the family. He stood, poker-straight and awkward-looking, and stared over everybody else's heads. Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George were all observing him, stony-faced.

"Please, come in, sit down, Minister!" fluttered Mrs. Weasley, straightening her hat. "Have a little purkey, or some tooding. ... I ' mean —"

"No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. Harry guessed that he had checked her name with Percy before they entered the house. "I don't want to intrude, wouldn't be here at all if Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly. ..."

"Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

". . . We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden . . . Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?"

The atmosphere around the table changed perceptibly. Every-body looked from Scrimgeour to Harry. Nobody seemed to find Scrimgeour's pretense that he did not know Harry's name convincing, or find it natural that he should be chosen to accompany the Minister around the garden when Ginny, Fleur, and George also had clean plates.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry into the silence.

He was not fooled; for all Scrimgeour's talk that they had just been in the area, that Percy wanted to look up his family, this must be the real reason that they had come, so that Scrimgeour could speak to Harry alone.

"It's fine," he said quietly, as he passed Lupin, who had half risen from his chair. "Fine," he added, as Mr. Weasley opened his mouth to speak.

"Wonderful!" said Scrimgeour, standing back to let Harry pass

through the door ahead of him. "We'll just take a turn around the garden, and Percy and I'll be off. Carry on, everyone!"

Harry walked across the yard toward the Weasleys' overgrown, snow-covered garden, Scrimgeour limping slightly at his side. He had, Harry knew, been Head of the Auror office; he looked tough and battle-scarred, very different from portly Fudge in his bowler hat.

"Charming," said Scrimgeour, stopping at the garden fence and looking out over the snowy lawn and the indistinguishable plants. "Charming."

Harry said nothing. He could tell that Scrimgeour was watching him.

"I've wanted to meet you for a very long time," said Scrimgeour, after a few moments. "Did you know that?"

"No," said Harry truthfully. !!

"Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been very protective of you," said Scrimgeour. "Natural, of course, natural, after what you've been through. . . . Especially what happened at : the Ministry ...":

He waited for Harry to say something, but Harry did not oblige, : so he went on, "I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has — most under-standably, as I say — prevented this."

Still, Harry said nothing, waiting.

"The rumors that have flown around!" said Scrimgeour. "Well, of course, we both know how these stories get distorted ... all these whispers of a prophecy . . . of you being 'the Chosen One'. . ."

They were getting near it now, Harry thought, the reason Scrimgeour was here.

"I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?",

Harry deliberated, wondering whether he ought to lie or not. He looked at the little gnome prints all around the flowerbeds, and the scuffed-up patch that marked the spot where Fred had caught the gnome now wearing the tutu at the top of the Christmas tree. Finally, he decided on the truth ... or a bit of it.

"Yeah, we've discussed it."

"Have you, have you . . ." said Scrimgeour. Harry could see, out of the corner of his eye, Scrimgeour squinting at him, so he pre-tended to be very interested in a gnome that had just poked its head out from underneath a frozen rhododendron. "And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?"

"Sorry, but that's between us," said Harry. He kept his voice as pleasant as he could, and Scrimgeour's tone, too, was light and friendly as he said, "Oh, of course, if it's a question of confidences, I wouldn't want you to divulge . . . no, no ... and in any case, does it really matter whether you are 'the Chosen One' or not?"

Harry had to mull that one over for a few seconds before re-ponding. "I don't really know what you mean, Minister."

"Well, of course, to you it will matter enormously," said Scrim-geour with a laugh. "But to the Wizarding community at large . . . it's all perception, isn't it? It's what people believe that's important."

Harry said nothing. He thought he saw, dimly, where they were heading, but he was not going to help Scrimgeour get there. The gnome under the rhododendron was now digging for worms at its roots, and Harry kept his eyes fixed upon it.

"People believe you are 'the Chosen One,' you see," said Scrim-geour. "They think you quite the hero — which, of course, you are, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Well, anyway," he pressed on, without waiting for a reply, "the point is, you are a symbol of hope for many, Harry. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named — well, naturally, it gives people a lift. And I can't help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it, well, almost a duty, to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost."

The gnome had just managed to get hold of a worm. It was now tugging very hard on it, trying to get it out of the frozen ground. Harry was silent so

long that Scrimgeour said, looking from Harry to the gnome, "Funny little chaps, aren't they? But what say you, Harry?"

"I don't exactly understand what you want," said Harry slowly. "'Stand alongside the Ministry' . . . What does that mean?"

"Oh, well, nothing at all onerous, I assure you," said Scrimgeour. "If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impression. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily. ..."

Harry felt anger bubbling in the pit of his stomach: So Dolores Umbridge was still at the Ministry, was she?

"So basically," he said, as though he just wanted to clarify a few points, "you'd like to give the impression that I'm working for the Ministry?"

"It would give everyone a lift to think you were more involved, Harry," said Scrimgeour, sounding relieved that Harry had cottoned on so quickly. "'The Chosen One,' you know. . . It's all about giving people hope, the feeling that exciting things are happening. ..."

"But if I keep running in and out of the Ministry," said Harry, still endeavoring to keep his voice friendly, "won't that seem as though I approve of what the Ministry's up to?"

"Well," said Scrimgeour, frowning slightly, "well, yes, that's partly why we'd like —"

"No, I don't think that'll work," said Harry pleasantly. "You see, I don't like some of the things the Ministry's doing. Locking up Stan Shunpike, for instance."

Scrimgeour did not speak for a moment but his expression hard-ened instantly. "I would not expect you to understand," he said, and he was not as successful at keeping anger out of his voice as Harry had been. "These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You are sixteen years old —"

"Dumbledore's a lot older than sixteen, and he doesn't think Stan should be in Azkaban either," said Harry. "You're making Stan a scapegoat, just like you want to make me a mascot."

They looked at each other, long and hard. Finally Scrimgeour said, with no pretense at warmth, "I see. You prefer — like your hero, Dumbledore — to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?" "I don't want to be used," said Harry.

"Some would say it's your duty to be used by the Ministry!" "Yeah, and others might say it's your duty to check that people really are Death Eaters before you chuck them in prison," said Harry, his temper rising now. "You're doing what Barty Crouch

did. You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we've got Fudge, pretending everything's lovely while people get murdered right under his nose, or we've got you, chucking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you've got 'the Chosen One' work-ing for you!" ' i

"So you're not 'the Chosen One'?" said Scrimgeour. '

"I thought you said it didn't matter either way?" said Harry, with a bitter laugh. "Not to you anyway."

"I shouldn't have said that," said Scrimgeour quickly. "It was tactless —"

"No, it was honest," said Harry. "One of the only honest things you've said to me. You don't care whether I live or die, but you do care that I help you convince everyone you're winning the war against Voldemort. I haven't forgotten, Minister...."

He raised his right fist. There, shining white on the back of his cold hand, were the scars which Dolores Umbridge had forced him to carve into his own flesh: I must not tell lies.

"I don't remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort was back. The Ministry wasn't so keen to be pals last year."

They stood in silence as icy as the ground beneath their feet. The gnome had finally managed to extricate his worm and was now sucking on it happily, leaning against the bottommost branches of the rhododendron bush.

"What is Dumbledore up to?" said Scrimgeour brusquely. "Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?"

"No idea," said Harry.

"And you wouldn't tell me if you knew," said Scrimgeour, "would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Harry.

"Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can't find out by other means."

"You can try," said Harry indifferently. "But you seem cleverer than Fudge, so I'd have thought you'd have learned from his mis-takes. He tried interfering at Hogwarts. You might have noticed he's not Minister anymore, but Dumbledore's still headmaster. I'd leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you."

There was a long pause.

"Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you," said Scrimgeour, his eyes cold and hard behind his wire-rimmed glasses, "Dumbledore's man through and through, aren't you, Potter?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry. "Glad we straightened that out."

And turning his back on the Minister of Magic, he strode back toward the house.

Chapter 17: A Sluggish Memory

Late in the afternoon, a few days after New Year, Harry, Ron, and Ginny lined up beside the kitchen fire to return to Hogwarts. The Ministry had arranged this one-off connection to the Floo Network to return students quickly and safely to the school. Only Mrs. Weasley was there to say good-bye, as Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur were all at work. Mrs. Weasley dissolved into tears at the moment of parting. Admittedly, it took very little to set her off lately; she had been crying on and off ever since Percy had stormed from the house on Christmas Day with his glasses splattered with mashed parsnip (for which Fred, George, and Ginny all claimed credit).

"Don't cry, Mum," said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. "It's okay. ..."

"Yeah, don't worry about us," said Ron, permitting his mother to plant a very wet kiss on his cheek, "or about Percy. He's such a prat, it's not really a loss, is it?"

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever as she enfolded Harry in her arms.

"Promise me you'll look after yourself.. .. Stay out of trouble. ..."

"I always do, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry. "I like a quiet life, you know me."

She gave a watery chuckle and stood back. "Be good, then, all of you. ..."

Harry stepped into the emerald fire and shouted "Hogwarts!" He had one last fleeting view of the Weasleys' kitchen and Mrs. Weasley's tearful face before the flames engulfed him; spinning very fast, he caught blurred glimpses of other Wizarding rooms, which were whipped out of sight before he could get a proper look; then he was slowing down, finally stopping squarely in the fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office. She barely glanced up from her work as he clambered out over the grate.

"Evening, Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet."

"No, Professor."

Harry straightened his glasses and flattened his hair as Ron came spinning into view. When Ginny had arrived, all three of them trooped out of McGonagall's office and off toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry glanced out of the corridor windows as they passed; the sun was already sinking over grounds carpeted in deeper snow than had lain over the Burrow garden. In the distance, he could see Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

"Baubles," said Ron confidently, when they reached the Fat Lady, who was looking rather paler than usual and winced at his loud voice.

"No," she said.

“What d’you mean, ‘no’ ?

"There is a new password," she said. "And please don't shout."

"But we've been away, how're we supposed to — ?"

"Harry! Ginny!"

Hermione was hurrying toward them, very pink-faced and wearing a cloak, hat, and gloves.

"I got back a couple of hours ago, I've just been down to visit Hagrid and Buck — I mean Witherwings," she said breathlessly. "Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Yeah," said Ron at once, "pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —"] "I've got something for you, Harry," said Hermione, neither looking at Ron nor giving any sign that she had heard him. "Oh, hang on — password. Abstinence."

"Precisely," said the Fat Lady in a feeble voice, and swung forward to reveal the portrait hole.

"What's up with her?" asked Harry.

"Overindulged over Christmas, apparently," said Hermione, rolling her eyes as she led the way into the packed common room. "She and her friend

Violet drank their way through all the wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway..."

She rummaged in her pocket for a moment, then pulled out a scroll of parchment with Dumbledore's writing on it.

"Great," said Harry, unrolling it at once to discover that his next lesson with Dumbledore was scheduled for the following night. "I've got loads to tell him — and you. Let's sit down —"

But at that moment there was a loud squeal of "Won-Won!" and Lavender Brown came hurtling out of nowhere and flung herself into Ron's arms. Several onlookers sniggered; Hermione gave a tinkling laugh and said, "There's a cable over here... Coming. Ginny?"

"No, thanks, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny, though Harry could not help noticing that she did not sound very enthusiastic. Leaving Ron and Lavender locked in a kind of vertical wrestling, match, Harry led Hermione over to the spare table.

"So how was your Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," she shrugged. "Nothing special. How was it at Won-Won's?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Harry. "Look, Hermione, can't you —"

"No, I can't," she said flatly. "So don't even ask."

"I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —"

"It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me. So what was this important news you wanted to tell me?"

She looked too fierce to argue with at that moment, so Harry dropped the subject of Ron and recounted all that he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. When he had finished, Hermione sat in thought for a moment and then said, "Don't you think — ?"

"— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing?"

"Well, yes," said Hermione.

"Ron's dad and Lupin think so," Harry said grudgingly. "But this definitely proves Malfoy's planning something, you can't deny that."

"No, I can't," she answered slowly.

"And he's acting on Voldemort's orders, just like I said!"

"Hmm . . . did either of them actually mention Voldemort's name?"

Harry frowned, trying to remember. "I'm not sure ... Snape definitely said 'your master,' and who else would that be?"

"I don't know," said Hermione, biting her lip. "Maybe his father?"

She stared across the room, apparently lost in thought, not even noticing Lavender tickling Ron. "How's Lupin?"

"Not great," said Harry, and he told her all about Lupin's mission among the werewolves and the difficulties he was facing. "Have you heard of this Fenrir Greyback?"

"Yes, I have!" said Hermione, sounding startled. "And so have you, Harry!"

"When, History of Magic? You know full well I never listened ..."

"No, no, not History of Magic — Malfoy threatened Borgin with Kim!" said Hermione. "Back in Knockturn Alley, don't you remember? He told Borgin that Greyback was an old family friend and that he'd be checking up on Borgin's progress!"

Harry gaped at her. "I forgot! But this proves Malfoy's a Death Eater, how else could he be in contact with Greyback and telling him what to do?"

"It is pretty suspicious," breathed Hermione. "Unless . . ." "Oh, come on," said Harry in exasperation, "you can't get round this one!"

"Well . . . there is the possibility it was an empty threat." "You're unbelievable, you are," said Harry, shaking his head.

"We'll see who's right. . . . You'll be eating your words, Hermione, just like the Ministry. Oh yeah, I had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well. . . ."

And the rest of the evening passed amicably with both of them abusing the Minister of Magic, for Hermione, like Ron, thought that after all the Ministry had put Harry through the previous year, they had a great deal of nerve asking him for help now.

The new term started next morning with a pleasant surprise for the sixth years: a large sign had been pinned to the common room notice boards overnight.

APPARITION LESSONS

If you are seventeen years of age, or will turn seventeen on or before the 31st August next, you are eligible for a twelve-week course of Apparition Lessons from a Ministry of Magic Apparition instructor. Please sign below if you would like to participate. Cost: 12 Galleons.

Harry and Ron joined the crowd that was jostling around the notice and taking it in turns to write their names at the bottom. Ron was just taking out his quill to sign after Hermione when Lavender crept up behind him, slipped her hands over his eyes, and trilled, "Guess who, Won-Won?" Harry turned to see Hermione stalking off; he caught up with her, having no wish to stay behind with Ron and Lavender, but to his surprise, Ron caught up with them only a little way beyond the portrait hole, his ears bright red and his expression disgruntled. Without a word, Hermione sped up to walk with Neville.

"So — Apparition," said Ron, his tone making it perfectly plain that Harry was not to mention what had just happened. "Should be a laugh, eh?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "Maybe it's better when you do it yourself, I didn't enjoy it much when Dumbledore took me along for the ride."

"I forgot you'd already done it. ... I'd better pass my test first

time," said Ron, looking anxious. "Fred and George did," "Charlie failed, though, didn't he?" "Yeah, but Charlie's bigger than me" — Ron held his arms out from his body as though he was a gorilla — "so Fred and George

didn't go on about it much . . . not to his face anyway . . ." "When can we take the actual test?" "Soon as we're seventeen. That's only March for me!" "Yeah, but you wouldn't be able to Apparate in here, not in the castle . . ."

"Not the point, is it? Everyone would know I could Apparate if I wanted."

Ron was not the only one to be excited at the prospect of Apparition. All that day there was much talk about the forthcoming lessons; a great deal of store was set by being able to vanish and reappear at will.

"How cool will it be when we can just —" Seamus clicked his ringers to indicate disappearance. "Me cousin Fergus does it just to annoy me, you wait till I can do it back. . . He'll never have another peaceful moment. . . ."

Lost in visions of this happy prospect, he flicked his wand a little too enthusiastically, so that instead of producing the fountain of pure water that was the object of today's Charms lesson, he let out a hoselike jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face.

"Harry's already Apparated," Ron told a slightly abashed Seamus, after Professor Flitwick had dried himself off with a wave of his wand and set Seamus lines: "I am a wizard, not a baboon brandishing a stick." "Dum — er — someone took him. Side-Along-Apparition, you know."

"Whoa!" whispered Seamus, and he, Dean, and Neville put their heads a little closer to hear what Apparition felt like. For the rest of the day, Harry was besieged with requests from the other sixth years to describe the sensation of Apparition. All of them seemed awed, rather than put off, when he told them how uncomfortable it was, and he was still answering detailed questions at ten to eight that evening, when he was forced to lie and say that he needed to return a book to the library, so as to escape in time for his lesson with Dumbledore.

The lamps in Dumbledore's office were lit, the portraits of previous headmasters were snoring gently in their frames, and the Pen-sieve was ready upon the desk once more. Dumbledore's hands lay on either side of it, the right one as blackened and burnt-looking as ever. It did not seem to have healed at all and Harry wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time, what had caused such a distinctive injury, but did not ask; Dumbledore had said that he would know eventually and there was, in any case, another subject he wanted to discuss. But before Harry could say anything about Snape and Malfoy, Dumbledore spoke.

"I hear that you met the Minister of Magic over Christmas?" "Yes," said Harry. "He's not very happy with me."

"No," sighed Dumbledore. "He is not very happy with me either. We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, but battle on."

Harry grinned.

"He wanted me to tell the Wizarding community that the Ministry's doing a wonderful job."

Dumbledore smiled.

"It was Fudge's idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his post, he sought a meeting with you, hoping that you would give him your

support —"

"After everything Fudge did last year?" said Harry angrily. "After Umbridge?"

"I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left: office. Within hours of Scrimgeour's appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you —"

"So that's why you argued!" Harry blurted out. "It was in the Daily Prophet"

"The Prophet is bound to report the truth occasionally," said Dumbledore, "if only accidentally. Yes, that was why we argued. Well, it appears that Rufus found a way to corner you at last."

"He accused me of being 'Dumbledore's man through and through.'"

"How very rude of him."

"I told him I was."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Harry, Fawkes the phoenix let out a low, soft, musical cry. To Harry's intense embarrassment, he suddenly realized

that Dumbledore's bright blue eyes looked rather watery, and he stared hastily at his own knees. When Dumbledore spoke, however, his voice was quite steady.

"I am very touched, Harry."

"Scrimgeour wanted to know where you go when you're not at Hogwarts," said Harry, still looking fixedly at his knees.

"Yes, he is very nosy about that," said Dumbledore, now sounding cheerful, and Harry thought it safe to look up again. "He has even attempted to have me followed. Amusing, really. He set Dawlish to tail me. It wasn't kind. I have already been forced to jinx Dawlish once; I did it again with the greatest regret."

"So they still don't know where you go?" asked Harry, hoping for more information on this intriguing subject, but Dumbledore merely smiled over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"No, they don't, and the time is not quite right for you to know either. Now, I suggest we press on, unless there's anything else — ?" "There is, actually, sir," said Harry. "It's about Malfoy and Snape."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"Yes, sir. I overheard them during Professor Slughorn's party . . . well, I followed them, actually. ..."

Dumbledore listened to Harry's story with an impassive face. When Harry had finished he did not speak for a few moments, then said, "Thank you for telling me this, Harry, but I suggest that you put it out of your mind. I do not think that it is of great importance."

"Not of great importance?" repeated Harry incredulously. "Professor, did you understand — ?"

"Yes, Harry, blessed as I am with extraordinary brainpower, I understood everything you told me," said Dumbledore, a little sharply. "I think you might even consider the possibility that I understood more than you did. Again, I am glad that you have confided in me, but let me reassure you that you have not told me anything that causes me disquiet."

Harry sat in seething silence, glaring at Dumbledore. What was going on? Did this mean that Dumbledore had indeed ordered Snape to find out what Malfoy was doing, in which case he had already heard everything Harry had just told him from Snape? Or was he really worried by what he had heard, but pretending not to be?

"So, sir," said Harry, in what he hoped was a polite, calm voice, "you definitely still trust — ?"

"I have been tolerant enough to answer that question already," said Dumbledore, but he did not sound very tolerant anymore. "My answer has not changed."

"I should think not," said a snide voice; Phineas Nigellus was evidently only pretending to be asleep. Dumbledore ignored him.

"And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. I have more important things to discuss with you this evening."

Harry sat there feeling mutinous. How would it be if he refused to permit the change of subject, if he insisted upon arguing the case against Malfoy? As though he had read Harry's mind, Dumbledore shook his head.

"Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what he has to say is much more important than anything the other might have to contribute!"

"I don't think what you've got to say is unimportant, sir," said Harry stiffly.

"Well, you are quite right, because it is not," said Dumbledore briskly. "I have two more memories to show you this evening, both obtained with enormous difficulty, and the second of them is, I think, the most important I have collected."

Harry did not say anything to this; he still felt angry at the reception his confidences had received, but could not see what was to be gained by arguing further.

"So," said Dumbledore, in a ringing voice, "we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school.

"Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head," continued Dumbledore, waving his blackened hand toward the shelf over his head where the Sorting Hat sat, ancient and unmoving. "How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know — perhaps that very evening. The knowledge can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of it reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed polite, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him."

"Didn't you tell them, sir, what he'd been like when you met him at the orphanage?" asked Harry.

"No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before and was resolved to turn over a fresh leaf. I chose to give him that chance."

Dumbledore paused and looked inquiringly at Harry, who had opened his mouth to speak. Here, again, was Dumbledore's tendency to trust people in spite of overwhelming evidence that they did not deserve it! But then Harry remembered something. . . .

"But you didn't really trust him, sir, did you? He told me . . . the Riddle who came out of that diary said, 'Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did.'"

"Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy," said Dumbledore. "I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues.

"As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group

had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, placing his withered hand on the Pensieve. "Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his

father had never set foot in Hogwarts. I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever, assumed the identity of Lord Volde-mort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family — the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death.

"All he had to go upon was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his mother's father's name. Finally, after painstaking research, through old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin's surviving line. In the summer of his sixteenth year, he left the orphanage to which he returned annually and set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will stand ..." :

Dumbledore rose, and Harry saw that he was again holding a small crystal bottle filled with swirling, pearly memory.

"I was very lucky to collect this," he said, as he poured the gleaming mass into the Pensieve. "As you will understand when we have experienced it. Shall we?"

Harry stepped up to the stone basin and bowed obediently until his face sank through the surface of the memory; he felt the familiar sensation of falling through nothingness and then landed upon a dirty stone floor in almost total darkness.

It took him several seconds to recognize the place, by which time Dumbledore had landed beside him. The Gaunts' house was now more

indescribably filthy than anywhere Harry had ever seen. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs, the floor coated in grime; moldy and rotting food lay upon the table amidst a mass of crusted pots. The only light came from a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry could see neither eyes nor mouth. He was slumped in an armchair by the fire, and Harry wondered for a moment whether he was dead. But

then there came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a wand in his right hand and a short knife in his left.

The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a boy Harry recognized at once: tall, pale, dark-haired, and handsome — the teenage Voldemort.

Voldemort's eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at each other, then the man staggered upright, the many empty bottles at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

"YOU!" he bellowed. "YOU!"

And he hurtled drunkenly at Riddle, wand and knife held aloft.

"Stop."

Riddle spoke in Parseltongue. The man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing to the floor. He stared at Riddle. There was a long silence while they contemplated each other. The man broke it.

"You speak it?"

"Yes, I speak it," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could not help but feel a resentful admiration for Voldemort's complete lack of fear. His race merely expressed disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

"Where is Marvolo?" he asked.

"Dead," said the other. "Died years ago, didn't he?"

Riddle frowned.

"Who are you, then?"

"I'm Morfin, ain't I?"

"Marvolo's son?"

"Course I am, then..." • ,, .

Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, the better to see Riddle, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stoned ring on his right hand.

"I thought you was that Muggle," whispered Morfin. "You look mighty like that Muggle."

"What Muggle?" said Riddle sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way," said Morfin, and he spat unexpectedly upon the floor between them. "You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older'n you, now I think on it. ..."

Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, still clutching the edge of the table for support. "He come back, see," he added stupidly.

Voldemort was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "Riddle came back?"

"Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "Robbed us, mind, before she ran off. , Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?"

Voldemort did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "Dishonored us, , she did, that little slut! And whore you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit. . . . It's over. ..."

He looked away, staggering slightly, and Voldemort moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing Voldemort's lamp and Morfin's candle, extinguishing everything. . . . Dumbledore's fingers closed tightly around Harry's arm and they were soaring back into the present again. The soft golden light in Dumbledore's office seemed to dazzle Harry's eyes after that impenetrable darkness.

"Is that all?" said Harry at once. "Why did it go dark, what happened?"

"Because Morfin could not remember anything from that point onward," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry back into his seat. "When he awoke next morning, he was lying on the floor, quite alone. Marvolo's ring had gone.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three bodies lying in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Senior and his mother and father.

"The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the Avadu Kedavra curse does not usually leave any sign of damage. . . . The exception sits before me," Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry's scar. "The Ministry, on the other hand, knew at once that this was a wizard's murder. They also knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Riddle house, a Muggle-hater who had already been imprisoned once for attacking one of the murdered people.

"So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted to the murder on the spot, giving details only the murderer could know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over his wand, which was proved at once to have been used to kill the Riddles. And he permitted himself to be led off to Azkaban without a fight.

All that disturbed him was the fact that his father's ring had disappeared. 'He'll kill me for losing it,' he told his captors over and over again. 'He'll kill me for losing his ring.' And that, apparently, was all he ever said again. He lived out the remainder of his life in Azkaban, lamenting the loss of Marvolo's last heirloom, and is buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have expired within its walls."

"So Voldemort stole Morfin's wand and used it?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

"That's right," said Dumbledore. "We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort Stupefied his uncle, took his wand, and proceeded across the valley to 'the big house over the way.' There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, and, for good measure, his Muggle grandparents, thus obliterating the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Gaunt hovel, performed the complex bit of magic that would implant a false memory in his uncle's mind, laid Morfin's wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient ring he wore, and departed."

"And Morfin never realized he hadn't done it?"

"Never," said Dumbledore. "He gave, as I say, a full and boastful confession."

"But he had this real memory in him all the time!" "Yes, but it took a great deal of skilled Legilimency to coax it out of him," said Dumbledore, "and why should anybody delve further into Morfin's mind when he had already confessed to the crime? However, I was able to secure a visit to Morfin in the last weeks of his life, by which time I was attempting to discover as much as I could about Voldemort's past. I extracted this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin's release from Azkaban. Before the Ministry reached their decision, however, Morfin had died."

"But how come the Ministry didn't realize that Voldemort had done all that to Morfin?" Harry asked angrily "He was underage at the time, wasn't he? I thought they could detect underage magic!" "You are quite right — they can detect magic, but not the perpetrator: You will remember that you were blamed by the Ministry for the Hover Charm that was, in fact, cast by —"

"Dobby," growled Harry; this injustice still rankled. "So if you're underage and you do magic inside an adult witch or wizard's house, the Ministry won't know?"

"They will certainly be unable to tell who performed the magic," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly at the look of great indignation on Harry's face. "They rely on witch and wizard parents to enforce their offspring's obedience while within their walls."

"Well, that's rubbish," snapped Harry. "Look what happened here, look what happened to Morfin!"

"I agree," said Dumbledore. "Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. But it is getting late, and I want you to see this other memory before we part. ..."

Dumbledore took from an inside pocket another crystal phial and Harry fell silent at once, remembering that Dumbledore had said it was the most important one he had collected. Harry noticed that the contents proved difficult to empty into the Pensieve, as though they had congealed slightly; did memories go bad?

"This will not take long," said Dumbledore, when he had finally emptied the phial. "We shall be back before you know it. Once more into the Pensieve, then . . ."

And Harry fell again through the silver surface, landing this time right in front of a man he recognized at once.

It was a much younger Horace Slughorn. Harry was so used to him bald that he found the sight of Slughorn with thick, shiny, straw-colored hair

quite disconcerting; it looked as though he had had his head thatched, though there was already a shiny Galleon-sized bald patch on his crown. His mustache, less massive than it was these days, was gingery-blond. He was not quite as rotund as the Slughorn Harry knew, though the golden buttons on his richly embroidered waistcoat were taking a fair amount of strain. His little feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, he was sitting well back in a comfortable winged armchair, one hand grasping a small glass of wine, the other searching through a box of crystalized pineapple.

Harry looked around as Dumbledore appeared beside him and saw that they were standing in Slughorn's office. Half a dozen boys were sitting around Slughorn, all on higher or lower seats than his, and all in their mid-teens. Harry recognized Voldemort at once. His was the most handsome face and he looked the most relaxed of all the boys. His right hand lay negligently upon the arm of his chair; with a jolt, Harry saw that he was wearing Marvolo's gold-and-black ring; he had already killed his father.

"Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?" he asked.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging a reproving, sugar-covered finger at Riddle, though ruining the effect slightly by winking. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite — "

As several of the boys tittered, something very odd happened. The whole room was suddenly filled with a thick white fog, so that Harry could see nothing but the face of Dumbledore, who was standing beside him. Then Slughorn's voice rang out through the mist, unnaturally loudly, "You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words. "

The fog cleared as suddenly as it had appeared and yet nobody made any allusion to it, nor did anybody look as though anything unusual had just happened. Bewildered, Harry looked around as a small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock.

"Good gracious, is it that time already?" said Slughorn. "You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrangle, I want your essay by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

Slughorn pulled himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk as the boys filed out. Voldemort, however, stayed behind. Harry could tell he had dawdled deliberately, wanting to be last in the room with Slughorn.

"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect..."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away...."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about. . . about Horcruxes?"

And it happened all over again: The dense fog filled the room so that Harry could not see Slughorn or Voldemort at all; only Dumbledore, smiling serenely beside him. Then Slughorn's voice boomed out again, just as it had done before.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!"

"Well, that's that," said Dumbledore placidly beside Harry.

"Time to go."

And Harry's feet left the floor to fall, seconds later, back onto the rug in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"That's all there is?" said Harry blankly.

Dumbledore had said that this was the most important memory of all, but he could not see what was so significant about it. Admittedly the fog, and the fact that nobody seemed to have noticed it, was odd, but other than that nothing seemed to have happened except that Voldemort had asked a question and failed to get an answer.

"As you might have noticed," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk, "that memory has been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" repeated Harry, sitting back down too.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Professor Slughorn has meddled with his own recollections."

"But why would he do that?"

"Because, I think, he is ashamed of what he remembers," said Dumbledore. "He has tried to rework the memory to show himself in a better light, obliterating those parts which he does not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the true memory is still there beneath the alterations."

"And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Harry. It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the real memory, which will undoubtedly be our most crucial piece of information of all."

Harry stared at him.

"But surely, sir," he said, keeping his voice as respectful as possible, "you don't need me — you could use Legilimency ... or Veritaserum. ..."

"Professor Slughorn is an extremely able wizard who will be expecting both," said Dumbledore. "He is much more accomplished at Occlumency than poor Morfin Gaunt, and I would be astonished if he has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this travesty of a recollection.

"No, I think it would be foolish to attempt to wrest the truth from Professor Slughorn by force, and might do much more harm than good; I do not wish him to leave Hogwarts. However, he has his weaknesses like the rest of us, and I believe that you are the one person who might be able to penetrate his defenses. It is most important that we secure the true memory, Harry. . . . How important, we will only know when we have seen the real thing. So, good luck . . . and good night."

A little taken aback by the abrupt dismissal, Harry got to his feet quickly. "Good night, sir."

As he closed the study door behind him, he distinctly heard Phineas Nigellus say, "I can't see why the boy should be able to do it better than you, Dumbledore."

"I wouldn't expect you to, Phineas," replied Dumbledore, and Fawkes gave another low, musical cry.

Chapter 18: Birthday Surprises

The next day Harry confided in both Ron and Hermione the task that Dumbledore had set him, though separately, for Hermione still refused to remain in Ron's presence longer than it took to give him a contemptuous look.

Ron thought that Harry was unlikely to have any trouble with Slughorn at all.

'He loves you,' he said over breakfast, waving an airy forkful of fried egg. 'Won't refuse you anything, will he? Not his little Potions Prince. Just hang back after class this afternoon and ask him.'

Hermione, however, took a gloomier view.

'He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him,' she said in a low voice, as they stood in the deserted, snowy courtyard at break. 'Horcruxes ... Horcruxes ... I've never even heard of them ...'

'You haven't?'

Harry was disappointed; he had hoped that Hermione might have been able to give him a clue as to what Horcruxes were.

'They must be really advanced Dark magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them? I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy ...'

'Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon ...'

'Oh, well, if Won-Won thinks that, you'd better do it,' she said, flaring up at once. 'After all, when has Won-Won's judgement ever been faulty?'

'Hermione, can't you —'

'No!' she said angrily, and stormed away, leaving Harry alone and ankle-deep in snow.

Potions lessons were uncomfortable enough these days, seeing as Harry, Ron and Hermione had to share a desk. Today, Hermione moved her cauldron around the table so that she was close to Ernie, and ignored both Harry and Ron.

'What've you done?' Ron muttered to Harry, looking at Hermione's haughty profile.

But before Harry could answer, Slughorn was calling for silence from the front of the room.

'Settle down, settle down, please! Quickly, now, lots of work to get through this afternoon! Golpalott's Third Law ... who can tell me -? But Miss Granger can, of course!'

Hermione recited at top speed: 'Golpalott's-Third-Law- states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to- more-than-the-sum-of-the-antidotes-for-each-of-the-separate- components.'

'Precisely!' beamed Slughorn. Ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott's Third Law as true ..."

Harry was going to have to take Slughorn's word for it that Golpalott's Third Law was true, because he had not understood any of it. Nobody apart from Hermione seemed to be following what Slughorn said next, either.

'... which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion's ingredients by Scarpin's Revelaspell, our primary aim is not the relatively simple one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in a

of themselves, but to find that added component which will, by an almost alchemical process, transform these disparate elements -'

Ron was sitting beside Harry with his mouth half-open, doodling absently on his new copy of Advanced Potion-Making. Ron kept forgetting that he could no longer rely on Hermione to help him out of trouble when he failed to grasp what was going on.

'... and so,' finished Slughorn, 'I want each of you to come and take one of these phials from my desk. You are to create an antidote for the poison within it before the end of the lesson. Good luck, and don't forget your protective gloves!'

Hermione had left her stool and was halfway towards Slughorn's desk before the rest of the class had realised it was time to move, and by the time Harry, Ron and Ernie returned to the table, she had already tipped the contents of her phial into her cauldron and was kindling a fire underneath it.

'It's a shame that the Prince won't be able to help you much with this, Harry,' she said brightly as she straightened up. 'You have to understand the principles involved this time. No short cuts or cheats!'

Annoyed, Harry uncorked the poison he had taken from Slughorn's desk, which was a garish shade of pink, tipped it into his cauldron and lit a fire underneath it. He did not have the faintest idea what he was supposed to do next. He glanced at Ron, who was now standing there looking rather gormless, having copied everything Harry had done.

'You sure the Prince hasn't got any tips?' Ron muttered to Harry.

Harry pulled out his trusty copy of Advanced Potion-Making and turned to the chapter on Antidotes. There was Golpalott's Third Law, stated word for word as Hermione had recited it, but not a single illuminating note in the

Prince's hand to explain what it meant. Apparently the Prince, like Hermione, had had no difficulty understanding it.

'Nothing,' said Harry gloomily.

Hermione was now waving her wand enthusiastically over her cauldron. Unfortunately, they could not copy the spell she was doing because she was now so good at non-verbal incantations that she did not need to say the words aloud. Ernie Macmillan, however, was muttering, 'Specialis revelio!' over his cauldron, which sounded impressive, so Harry and Ron hastened to imitate him.

It took Harry only five minutes to realise that his reputation as the best potion-maker in the class was crashing around his ears. Slughorn had peered hopefully into his cauldron on his first circuit of the dungeon, preparing to exclaim in delight as he usually did, and instead had withdrawn his head hastily, coughing, as the smell of bad eggs overwhelmed him. Hermione's expression could not have been any smugger; she had loathed being outperformed in every Potions class. She was now decanting the mysteriously separated ingredients of her poison into ten different crystal phials. More to avoid watching this irritating sight than anything else, Harry bent over the Half-Blood Prince's book and turned a few pages with unnecessary force.

And there it was, scrawled right across a long list of antidotes.

Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Harry stared at these words for a moment. Hadn't he once, long ago, heard of bezoars? Hadn't Snape mentioned them in their first ever Potions lesson? 'A stone taken from the stomach of a goat, which will protect from most poisons.'

It was not an answer to the Golpalott problem, and had Snape still been their teacher, Harry would not have dared do it, but this was a moment for desperate measures. He hastened towards the store cupboard and rummaged within it, pushing aside unicorn horns and tangles of dried herbs until he found, at the very back, a small card box on which had been scribbled the word 'Bezoars'.

He opened the box just as Slughorn called, 'Two minutes left, everyone!' Inside were half a dozen shrivelled brown objects, looking more like dried-up kidneys than real stones. Harry seized one, put the box back in the cupboard and hurried back to his cauldron.

'Time's ... UP!' called Slughorn genially. 'Well, let's see how you've done! Blaise ... what have you got for me?'

Slowly, Slughorn moved around the room, examining the various antidotes. Nobody had finished the task, although Hermione was trying to cram a few more ingredients into her bottle before Slughorn reached her. Ron had given up completely, and was merely trying to avoid breathing in the putrid fumes issuing from his cauldron. Harry stood there waiting, the bezoar clutched in a slightly sweaty hand.

Slughorn reached their table last. He sniffed Ernie's potion and passed on to Ron's with a grimace. He did not linger over Ron's cauldron, but backed away swiftly, retching slightly.

'And you, Harry,' he said. 'What have you got to show me?'

Harry held out his hand, the bezoar sitting on his palm.

Slughorn looked down at it for a full ten seconds. Harry wondered, for a moment, whether he was going to shout at him. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

'You've got a nerve, boy!' he boomed, taking the bezoar and holding it up so that the class could see it. 'Oh, you're like your mother ... well, I can't fault you ... a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!'

Hermione, who was sweaty-faced and had soot on her nose, looked livid. Her half-finished antidote, comprising fifty-two ingredients including a chunk of her own hair,

bubbled sluggishly behind Slughorn, who had eyes for nobody but Harry.

'And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?' she asked through gritted teeth.

That's the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!' said Slughorn happily, before Harry could reply. 'Just like his mother, she had the same

intuitive grasp of potion-making, it's undoubtedly from Lily he gets it ... yes, Harry, yes, if you've got a bezoar to hand, of course that would do the trick ... although as they don't work on everything, and are pretty rare, it's still worth knowing how to mix antidotes ...'

The only person in the room looking angrier than Hermione was Malfoy, who, Harry was pleased to see, had spilled some-thing that looked like cat sick over himself. Before either of them could express their fury that Harry had come top of the class by not doing any work, however, the bell rang.

'Time to pack up!' said Slughorn. 'And an extra ten points to Gryffindor for sheer cheek!'

Still chuckling, he waddled back to his desk at the front of the dungeon.

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him luck as they left; both looked rather annoyed. At last Harry and Slughorn were the only two left in the room.

'Come on, now, Harry, you'll be late for your next lesson,' said Slughorn affably, snapping the gold clasps shut on his dragonskin briefcase.

'Sir,' said Harry, reminding himself irresistibly of Voldemort, 'I wanted to ask you something.'

'Ask away, then, my dear boy, ask away ..."

'Sir, I wondered what you know about ... about Horcruxes?'

Slughorn froze. His round face seemed to sink in upon itself. He licked his lips and said hoarsely, 'What did you say?' 'I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see -'

'Dumbledore put you up to this,' whispered Slughorn.

His voice had changed completely. It was not genial any more, but shocked, terrified. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow.

'Dumbledore's shown you that - that memory,' said Slughorn. 'Well? Hasn't he?'

'Yes,' said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

'Yes, of course,' said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. 'Of course ... well, if you've seen that memory, Harry, you'll know that I don't know anything - anything -he repeated the word forcefully '- about Horcruxes.'

He seized his dragonskin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket and marched to the dungeon door.

'Sir,' said Harry desperately, 'I just thought there might be a bit more to the memory -'

'Did you?' said Slughorn. Then you were wrong, weren't you? **WRONG!**

He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview. Hermione was still seething at the way Harry had triumphed without doing the work properly. Ron was resentful that Harry hadn't slipped him a bezoar, too.

'It would've just looked stupid if we'd both done it!' said Harry irritably. 'Look, I had to try and soften him up so I could ask him about Voldemort, didn't I? Oh, will you get a grip!' he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound of the name.

Infuriated by his failure and by Ron and Hermione's atti-

tudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do next about Slughorn. He decided that, for the time being, he would let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security before returning to the attack.

When Harry did not question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him, and appeared to have put the

matter from his mind. Harry awaited an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch practice. Unfortunately, however, no such invitation arrived. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew, had anybody else. Harry could not help wondering whether this meant that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities to question him.

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first time in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot that she was annoyed at Harry for his trick with the bezoar,

'I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!' she told him. 'Not a single one! I've been right through the restricted section and even in the most horrible books, where they tell you how to brew the most gruesome potions -nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduction to *Magick Most Evil* — listen — "of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction" ... I mean, why mention it, then?' she said impatiently, slamming the old book shut; it let out a ghostly wail. 'Oh, shut up,' she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag. 'I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see -

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The snow melted around the school as February arrived, to be replaced by cold, dreary wetness. Purplish-grey clouds hung low over the castle and a constant fall of chilly rain made the lawns slippery and muddy. The upshot of this was that the sixth-years' first Apparition lesson, which was scheduled for a Saturday morning so that no normal lessons would be missed, took place in the Great Hall instead of in the grounds.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Hall (Ron had come down with Lavender) they found that the tables had disappeared. Rain lashed against the high windows and the enchanted ceiling swirled darkly above them as they assembled in front of Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout - the Heads of House - and a small wizard whom Harry took to be the Apparition Instructor from the Ministry. He was oddly colourless, with transparent eyelashes, wispy hair and an insubstantial air, as though a single

gust of wind might blow him away. Harry wondered whether constant dis-appearances and reappearances had somehow diminished his substance, or whether this frail build was ideal for anyone wishing to vanish.

'Good morning,' said the Ministry wizard, when all the students had arrived and the Heads of House had called for quiet. 'My name is Wilkie Twycross and I shall be your Ministry-Apparition Instructor for the next twelve weeks. I hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition test in this time -'

'Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!' barked Professor McGonagall.

Everybody looked round. Malfoy had flushed a dull pink; he looked furious as he stepped away from Crabbe, with whom he appeared to have been having a whispered argument. Harry glanced quickly at Snape, who also looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy's rudeness than the fact that McGonagall had reprimanded one of his house.

'- by which time, many of you may be ready to take your test,' Twycross continued, as though there had been no interruption.

'As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The Headmaster has lifted this enchantment, purely within the Great Hall, for one hour, so as to enable you to practise. May I emphasise that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you would be unwise to try.

'I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you.'

There was a great scrambling and jostling as people separated, banged into each other, and ordered others out of their space. The Heads of House moved among the students, marshalling them into position and breaking up arguments.

'Harry, where are you going?' I demanded Hermione.

But Harry did not answer; he was moving quickly through the crowd, past the place where Professor Flitwick was making squeaky attempts to position a few Ravenclaws, all of whom wanted to be near the front, past Professor Sprout, who was chivvying the Hufflepuffs into line, until, by dodging around Ernie Macmillan, he managed to position himself right at the back of the crowd, directly behind Malfoy, who was taking advantage of the general upheaval to continue his argument with Crabbe, standing five feet away and looking mutinous.

'I don't know how much longer, all right?' Malfoy shot at him, oblivious to Harry standing right behind him. 'It's taking longer than I thought it would.'

Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy appeared to second-guess what he was going to say.

'Look, it's none of your business what I'm doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you're told and keep a lookout!'

'I tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Harry said, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear him.

Malfoy spun round on the spot, his hand flying to his wand, but at that precise moment the four Heads of House shouted, 'Quiet!' and silence fell again. Malfoy turned slowly to face the front.

'Thank you,' said Twycross. 'Now then ...'

He waved his wand. Old-fashioned wooden hoops instantly appeared on the floor in front of every student.

'The important things to remember when Apparating are the three Ds!' said Twycross. 'Destination, Determination, Deliberation!'

'Step one: fix your mind firmly upon the desired destination,' said Twycross. 'In this case, the interior of your hoop. Kindly concentrate upon that destination now.'

Everybody looked around furtively, to check that everyone else was staring into their hoop, then hastily did as they were told. Harry gazed at the circular patch of dusty floor enclosed by his hoop and tried hard to think of nothing else. This proved impossible, as he couldn't stop puzzling over what Malfoy was doing that needed lookouts.

"Step two,' said Twycross, 'focus your determination to occupy the visualised space! Let your yearning to enter it flood from your mind to every particle of your body!'

Harry glanced around surreptitiously. A little way to his left, Ernie Macmillan was contemplating his hoop so hard that his face had turned pink; it looked as though he was straining to lay a Quaffle-sized egg. Harry bit back a laugh and hastily returned his gaze to his own hoop.

'Step three,' called Twycross, 'and only when I give the command ... lum on the spot, feeling your way into nothingness, moving with deliberation I. On my command, now ... one- I

Harry glanced around again; lots of people were looking positively alarmed at being asked to Apparate so quickly.

Harry tried to fix his thoughts on his hoop again; he had already forgotten what the three Ds stood for.

: - THREE!'

Harry spun on the spot, lost his balance and nearly fell over. He was not the only one. The whole Hall was suddenly full of staggering people; Neville was flat on his back; Ernie Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouetting leap into his hoop and looked momentarily thrilled, until he caught sight of Dean Thomas roaring with laughter at him.

'Never mind, never mind,' said Twycross dryly, who did not seem to have expected anything better. 'Adjust your hoops, please, and back to your original positions ...'

The second attempt was no better than the first. The third was just as bad. Not until the fourth did anything exciting happen. There was a horrible screech of pain and everybody looked around, terrified, to see Susan Bones of Hufflepuff wobbling in her hoop with her left leg still standing five feet away where she had started.

The Heads of House converged on her; there was a great bang and a puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal Susan sobbing, reunited with her leg but looking horrified.

'Spl'nching, or the separation of random body parts,' said Wilkie Twycross dispassionately, 'occurs when the mind is insufficiently determined. You must concentrate continually upon your destination, and move, without haste, but with deliberation ... thus.'

Twycross stepped forwards, turned gracefully on the spot with his arms outstretched and vanished in a swirl of robes, reappearing at the back of the Hall. 'Remember the three Ds,' he said, 'and try again ... one -two - three -'

But an hour later, Susan's Splinching was still the most interesting thing that had happened. Twycross did not seem discouraged. Fastening his cloak

at his neck, he merely said, 'Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: Destin-ation. Determination. Deliberation.'

With that, he waved his wand, Vanishing the hoops, and walked out of the Hall accompanied by Professor McGonagall. Talk broke out at once as people began moving towards the Entrance Hall.

'How did you do?' asked Ron, hurrying towards Harry. 'I think I felt something the last time I tried - a kind of tingling in my feet.'

'I expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won,' said a voice behind them, and Hermione stalked past, smirking.

'I didn't feel anything,' said Harry, ignoring this inter-ruption. "But I don't care about that now-'

'What d'you mean, you don't care ... don't you want to learn to Apparate?' said Ron incredulously.

'I'm not fussed, really. I prefer flying,' said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see where Malfoy was, and speeding up as they came into the Entrance Hall. 'Look, hurry up, will you, there's something I want to do ...'

Perplexed, Ron followed Harry back to Gryffindor Tower at a run. They were temporarily detained by Peeves, who had jammed a door on the fourth floor shut and was refusing to let anyone pass until they set fire to their own

pants, but Harry and Ron simply turned back and took one of their trusted short cuts. Within five minutes, they were climbing through the portrait hole.

'Are you going to tell me what we're doing, then?' asked Ron, panting slightly.

'Up here,' said Harry, and he crossed the common room and led the way through the door to the boys' staircase.

Their dormitory was, as Harry had hoped, empty. He flung open his trunk and began to rummage in it, while Ron watched impatiently.

'Harry ...'

'Malfoy's using Crabbe and Goyle as lookouts. He was arguing with Crabbe just now. I want to know ... aha.'

He had found it, a folded square of apparently blank parchment, which he now smoothed out and tapped with [he tip of his wand.

'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good ... or Malfoy is,

At once, the Marauder's Map appeared on the parchment's surface. Here was a detailed plan of every one of the castle's floors and, moving around it, the tiny, labelled black dots that signified each of the castle's occupants.

'Help me find Malfoy,' said Harry urgently.

He laid the map upon his bed and he and Ron leaned over it, searching.

'There!' said Ron, after a minute or so. 'He's in the Slytherin common room, look ... with Parkinson and Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle ...'

Harry looked down at the map, disappointed, but rallied almost at once.

'Well, I'm keeping an eye on him from now on,' he said firmly. 'And the moment I see him lurking somewhere with Crabbe and Goyle keeping watch outside, it'll be on with the old Invisibility Cloak and off to find out what he's-'

He broke off as Neville entered the dormitory, bringing with him a strong smell of singed material, and began rum-maging in his trunk for a fresh pair of pants.

Despite his determination to catch Malfoy out, Harry had no luck at all over the next couple of weeks. Although he consulted the map as often as he could, sometimes making unnecessary visits to the bathroom between lessons to search it, he did not once see Malfoy anywhere suspicious. Admittedly, he spotted Crabbe and Goyle moving around the castle on their own more often than usual, sometimes remaining stationary in deserted corridors, but at these times Malfoy was not only nowhere near them, but impossible to locate on the map at all. This was most mysterious. Harry toyed with the possibility that Malfoy was actually leaving the school grounds, but could not see how he could be doing it, given the very high

level of security now operating within the castle. He could only suppose that he was missing Malfoy amongst the hundreds of tiny black dots upon the map. As for the fact that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle appeared to be going their different ways when they were usually inseparable, these things happened as people got older - Ron and Hermione, Harry reflected sadly, were living proof.

February moved towards March with no change in the weather except that it became windy as well as wet. To general indignation, a sign went up on all common-room noticeboards that the next trip into Hogsmeade had been cancelled. Ron was furious.

'It was on my birthday!' he said, 'I was looking forward to that!'

'Not a big surprise, though, is it?' said Harry. 'Not after what happened to Katie.'

She had still not returned from Si Mungo's. What was more, further disappearances had been reported in the Daily Prophet, including several relatives of students at Hogwarts.

'But now all I've got to look forward to is stupid Apparition!' said Ron grumpily. 'Big birthday treat ...'

Three lessons on, Apparition was proving as difficult as

ever, though a few more people had managed to Splinch themselves. Frustration was running high and there was a certain amount of ill-feeling towards Wilkie Twycross and his three Ds, which had inspired a number of nicknames for him, the politest of which were Dog-breath and Dung-head.

'Happy birthday, Ron,' said Harry, when they were woken on the first of March by Seamus and Dean leaving noisily for breakfast. 'Have a present.'

He threw the package across on to Ron's bed, where it joined a small pile of them that must, Harry assumed, have been delivered by house-elves in the night.

'Cheers,' said Ron drowsily, and as he ripped off the paper Harry got out of bed, opened his own trunk and began rum-maging in it for the Marauder's Map, which he hid after every use. He turfed out half the contents of his trunk before he found it hiding beneath the rolled-up socks in which he was still keeping his bottle of lucky potion, Felix Felicis.

'Right,' he murmured, taking it back to bed with him, tap-ping it quietly and murmuring, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,' so that Neville, who was passing the foot of his bed at the time, would not hear.

'Nice one, Harry!' said Ron enthusiastically, waving the new pair of Quidditch Keeper's gloves Harry had given him.

'No problem,' said Harry absent-mindedly, as he searched the Slytherin dormitory closely for Malfoy. 'Hey ... I don't think he's in his bed ...'

Ron did not answer; he was too busy unwrapping presents, every now and then letting out an exclamation of pleasure.

'Seriously good haul this year!' he announced, holding up a heavy gold watch with odd symbols around the edge and tiny moving stars instead of hands. 'See what Mum and Dad got me? Blimey, I think I'll come of age next year too ...

'Cool,' muttered Harry, sparing the watch a glance before peering more closely at the map. Where was Malfoy? He did not seem to be at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, eating breakfast ... he was nowhere near Snape, who was sitting in his study ... he wasn't in any of the bathrooms or in the hospital wing ...

'Want one? I said Ron thickly, holding out a box of Chocolate Cauldrons.

'No thanks,' said Harry, looking up. 'Malfoy's gone again!'

'Can't have done,' said Ron, stuffing a second Cauldron into his mouth as he slid out of bed to get dressed. 'Come on. if you don't hurry up you'll have to Apparate on an empty-stomach ... might make it easier, I suppose ..."

Ron looked thoughtfully at the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, then shrugged and helped himself to a third.

Harry tapped the map with his wand, muttered, 'Mischief managed,' though it hadn't been, and got dressed, thinking hard. There had to be an explanation for Malfoy's periodic disappearances, but he simply could not think what it could be. The best way of finding out would be to tail him, but even with the Invisibility Cloak this was an impractical idea; he had lessons, Quidditch practice, homework and Apparition; he could not follow Malfoy around school all day without his absence being remarked upon,

'Ready?' he said to Ron.

He was halfway to the dormitory door when he realised that Ron had not moved, but was leaning on his bedpost, staring out of the rain-washed window with a strangely un-focused look on his face.

'Ron? Breakfast.'

'I'm not hungry,'

Harry stared at him.

'I thought you just said -?'

'-Well, all right, I'll come down with you,' sighed Ron, 'but I don't want to eat.'

Harry scrutinised him suspiciously.

'You've just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven't you?'

'It's not that,' Ron sighed again. 'You ... you wouldn't understand.'

'Fair enough,' said Harry, albeit puzzled, as he turned to open the door.

'Harry!' said Ron suddenly.

'What?'

'Harry, I can't stand it!'

'You can't stand what?' asked Harry, now starting to feel definitely alarmed. Ron was rather pale and looked as though he was about to be sick.

'I can't stop thinking about her!' said Ron hoarsely.

Harry gaped at him. He had not expected this and was not sure he wanted to hear it. Friends they might be, but if Ron started calling Lavender 'Lav-Lav', he would have to pui his foot down.

'Why does that stop you having breakfast?' Harry asked, trying to inject a note of common sense into the proceedings.

'I don't think she knows I exist,' said Ron with a desperate gesture.

'She definitely knows you exist,' said Harry, bewildered. 'She keeps snogging you, doesn't she?'

Ron blinked.

'Who are you talking about?'

'Who are you talking about?' said Harry, with an increasing sense that all reason had dropped out of the conversation.

'Romilda Vane,' said Ron softly, and his whole face seemed to illuminate as he said it, as though hit by a ray of purest sunlight. They stared at each other for almost a whole minute, before Harry said, 'This is a joke, right? You're joking.'

'I think ... Harry, I think I love her,' said Ron in a strangled voice.

'OK,' said Harry, walking up to Ron to get a better look at the glazed eyes and the pallid complexion, 'OK ... say that again with a straight face.'

'I love her,' repeated Ron breathlessly. 'Have you seen her hair, it's all black and shiny and silky ... and her eyes? Her big dark eyes? And her -'

'This is really funny and everything,' said Harry impatiently, 'but joke's over, all right? Drop it.'

He turned to leave; he had got two steps towards the door when a crashing blow hit him on the right ear. Staggering, he looked round. Ron's fist was drawn right back, his face was contorted with rage; he was about to strike again.

Harry reacted instinctively; his wand was out of his pocket and the incantation sprang to mind without conscious thought: *Levicorpus!*

Ron yelled as his heel was wrenched upwards once more; he dangled helplessly, upside-down, his robes hanging off him.

'What was that for?' Harry bellowed.

'You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!' shouted Ron, who was slowly turning purple in the face as all the blood rushed to his head.

'This is insane!' said Harry. 'What's got into -?'

And then he saw the box lying open on Ron's bed and the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.

'Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?'

'They were a birthday present!' shouted Ron, revolving slowly in midair as he struggled to get free. 'I offered you one, didn't I?'

'You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?'

'They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!'

'They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, I chucked them out of my trunk when I was looking for the map. They're the Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda gave me before Christmas and they're all spiked with love potion!'

But only one word of this seemed to have registered with Ron.

'Romilda?' he repeated. 'Did you say Romilda? Harry - do you know her? Can you introduce me?'

Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. A part of him - the part closest to his throbbing right ear - was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off ... but on the other hand, they were supposed to be friends, Ron had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry- thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted Ron to declare undying love for Romilda Vane.

'Yeah, I'll introduce you,' said Harry, thinking fast. 'I'm going to let you down now, OK?'

He sent Ron crashing back to the floor (his ear did hurt quite a lot), but Ron simply bounded to his feet again, grinning.

'She'll be in Slughorn's office, I said Harry confidently, leading the way to the door.

'Why will she be in there?' asked Ron anxiously, hurrying to keep up.

'Oh, she has extra Potions lessons with him,' said Harry, inventing wildly.

'Maybe I could ask if I can have them with her?' said Ron eagerly.

'Great idea,' said Harry. Lavender was waiting beside the portrait hole, a complication Harry had not foreseen.

'You're late, Won-Won!' she pouted. 'I've got you a birth-day-'

'Leave me alone,' said Ron impatiently, 'Harry's going to introduce me to Romilda Vane.'

And without another word to her, he pushed his way out of the portrait hole. Harry tried to make an apologetic face to Lavender, but it might have turned out simply amused, because she looked more offended than ever as the Fat Lady swung shut behind them.

Harry had been slightly worried that Slughorn might be at breakfast, but he answered his office door at the first knock, wearing a green velvet dressing-gown and matching nightcap and looking rather bleary-eyed.

'Harry,' he mumbled. 'This is very early for a call ... I generally sleep late on a Saturday ...'

'Professor, I'm really sorry to disturb you,' said Harry as quietly as possible, while Ron stood on tiptoe, attempting to see past Slughorn into his room, 'but my friend Ron's swallowed a love potion by mistake. You couldn't make him an antidote, could you? I'd take him to Madam Pomfrey, but we're not supposed to have anything from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and, you know ... awkward questions ...'

'I'd have thought you could have whipped him up a remedy, Harry, an expert potioneer like you?' asked Slughorn. 'Er,' said Harry, somewhat distracted by the fact that Ron was now elbowing him in the ribs in an attempt to force his way into the room, 'well, I've never mixed an antidote for a love potion, sir, and by the time I get it right Ron might've done something serious -'

Helpfully, Ron chose this moment to moan, 'I can't see her. Harry - is he hiding her?'

'Was this potion within date?' asked Slughorn, now eyeing Ron with professional interest. 'They can strengthen, you know, the longer they're kept.'

That would explain a lot,' panted Harry, now positively wrestling with Ron to keep him from knocking Slughorn over. 'It's his birthday, Professor,' he added imploringly.

'Oh, all right, come in, then, come in,' said Slughorn, relenting. 'I've got the necessary here in my bag, it's not a difficult antidote ...'

Ron burst through the door into Slughorn's overheated, crowded study, tripped over a tasselled footstool, regained his balance by seizing Harry around the neck and muttered, 'She didn't see that, did she?'

'She's not here yet,' said Harry, watching Slughorn opening his potion kit and adding a few pinches of this and that to a small crystal bottle.

That's good,' said Ron fervently. 'How do I look?'

'Very handsome,' said Slughorn smoothly, handing Ron a glass of clear liquid. 'Now drink that up, it's a tonic for the nerves, keep you calm when she arrives, you know,'

'Brilliant,' said Ron eagerly, and he gulped the antidote down noisily.

Harry and Slughorn watched him. For a moment, Ron beamed at them. Then, very slowly, his grin sagged and vanished, to be replaced by an expression of utmost horror.

'Back to normal, then?' said Harry, grinning. Slughorn chuckled. Thanks a lot, Professor.'

'Don't mention it, m'boy, don't mention it,' said Slughorn, as Ron collapsed into a nearby armchair, looking devastated. 'Pick-me-up, that's what he needs,' Slughorn continued, now-bustling over to a table loaded with drinks. 'I've got Butter-beer, I've got wine, I've got one last bottle of this oak-matured mead ... hmm ... meant to give that to Dumbledore for

Christmas ... ah well ...' he shrugged '... he can't miss what he's never had! Why don't we open it now and celebrate Mr Weasley's birthday? Nothing like a fine spirit to chase away the pangs of disappointed love ...'

He chortled again and Harry joined in. This was the first time he had found himself almost alone with Slughorn since his disastrous first attempt to extract the true memory from him. Perhaps, if he could just keep Slughorn in a good mood ... perhaps if they got through enough of the oak-matured mead ...

There you are, then,' said Slughorn, handing Harry and Ron a glass of mead each, before raising his own. 'Well, a very happy birthday, Ralph -'

'- Ron -' whispered Harry.

But Ron, who did not appear to be listening to the toast, had already thrown the mead into his mouth and swallowed it.

There was one second, hardly more than a heartbeat, in which Harry knew there was something terribly wrong and Slughorn, it seemed, did not.

'- and may you have many more -

'Ron!'

Ron had dropped his glass; he half-rose from his chair and then crumpled, his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Foam was dribbling from his mouth and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

'Professor!' Harry bellowed. 'Do something!'

But Slughorn seemed paralysed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: his skin was turning blue.

'What - but -' spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted towards Slughorn's open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the terrible sound of Ron's gargling breath filled the room. Then

he found it - the shrivelled kidney-like stone Slughorn had taken from him in Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron's side, wrenched open his jaw and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder, a rattling gasp and his body became limp and still.

Chapter 19: Elf Tails

So, all in all, not one of Ron's better birthdays?" said Fred.

It was evening; the hospital wing was quiet, the windows curtained, the lamps lit. Ron's was the only occupied bed. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting around him; they had spent all day waiting outside the double doors, trying to see inside whenever somebody went in or out. Madam Pomfrey had only let them enter at eight o'clock. Fred and George had arrived at ten past.

"This isn't how we imagined handing over our present," said George grimly, putting down a large wrapped gift on Ron's bedside cabinet and sitting beside Ginny.

"Yeah, when we pictured the scene, he was conscious," said Fred.

"There we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him —" said George.

"You were in Hogsmeade?" asked Ginny, looking up.

"We were thinking of buying Zonko's," said Fred gloomily. "A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it'll do us if you lot aren't allowed out at weekends to buy our stuff anymon ... But never mind that now."

He drew up a chair beside Harry and looked at Ron's pale face.

"How exactly did it happen, Harry?"

Harry retold the story he had already recounted, it felt like a hundred times to Dumbledore, to McGonagall, to Madam Pomfrey, to Hermione, and to Ginny.

". . . and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit, Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned up, and they brought Ron up here. They reckon he'll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he'll have to stay here a week or so ... keep taking essence of rue . . ."

"Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar," said George in a low voice.

"Lucky there was one in the room," said Harry, who kept turning cold at the thought of what would have happened if he had not been able to lay hands on the little stone.

Hermione gave an almost inaudible sniff. She had been exceptionally quiet all day. Having hurtled, white-faced, up to Harry outside the hospital wing and demanded to know what had happened., she had taken almost no part in Harry and Ginny's obsessive discussion about how Ron had been poisoned, but merely stood beside them, clench-jawed and frightened-looking, until at last they had been allowed in to see him.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Fred asked Ginny. "They've already seen him, they arrived an hour ago — they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon. . . ."

There was a pause while they all watched Ron mumble a little in his sleep.

"So the poison was in the drink?" said Fred quietly.

"Yes," said Harry at once; he could think of nothing else and was glad for the opportunity to start discussing it again. "Slughorn poured it out —"

"Would he have been able to slip something into Ron's glass without you seeing?"

"Probably," said Harry, "but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?"

"No idea," said Fred, frowning. "You don't think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?"

"Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?" asked Ginny. "I dunno," said Fred, "but there must be loads of people who'd like to poison Harry, mustn't there? 'The Chosen One' and all that?" "So you think Slughorn's a Death Eater?" said Ginny. .,

"Anything's possible," said Fred darkly. "He could be under the Imperius Curse," said George. "Or he could be innocent," said Ginny. "The poison

could have been in the bottle, in which case it was probably meant for Slughorn himself."

"Who'd want to kill Slughorn?"

"Dumbledore reckons Voldemort wanted Slughorn on his side," said Harry. "Slughorn was in hiding for a year before he came to Hogwarts. And . . ." He thought of the memory Dumbledore had not yet been able to extract from Slughorn. "And maybe Voldemort wants him out of the way, maybe he thinks he could be valuable to Dumbledore."

"But you said Slughorn had been planning to give the Untie to Dumbledore for Christmas," Ginny reminded him. "So the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore."

"Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," said Hermione, speaking for the first time in hours and sounding as though she had a bad head cold. "Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known there was a good chance he'd keep something that tasty for himself." I

"Er-my-nee," croaked Ron unexpectedly from between them

They all fell silent, watching him anxiously, but after muttering incomprehensibly for a moment he merely started snoring.

The dormitory doors flew open, making them all jump: Hagrid came striding toward them, his hair rain-flecked, his bearskin coat flapping behind

him, a crossbow in his hand, leaving a trail of muddy dolphin-sized footprints all over the floor.

"Bin in the forest all day!" he panted. "Aragog's worse, I bin readin' to him — didn' get up ter dinner till jus' now an' then Professor Sprout told me abou' Ron! How is he?"

"Not bad," said Harry. "They say he'll be okay."

"No more than six visitors at a time!" said Madam Pomfrey, hurrying out of her office.

"Hagrid makes six," George pointed out.

"Oh . . . yes. . ." said Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have been counting Hagrid as several people due to his vastness. To cover her confusion, she hurried off to clear up his muddy foot prints with her wand.

"I don' believe this," said Hagrid hoarsely, shaking his great shaggy head as he stared down at Ron. "Jus' don' believe it... Look at him lyin' there. . . . Who'd want ter hurt him, eh?"

"That's just what we were discussing," said Harry. "We don't know."

"Someone couldn' have a grudge against the Gryfinndor Quidditch team, could they?" said Hagrid anxiously. "Firs' Katie, now Ron . . ."

"I can't see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team," said

I m urge.

Wood might've done the Slytherins if he could've got away with it," said Fred fairly.

Well, I don't think it's Quidditch, but I think there's a connection between the attacks," said Hermione quietly

"How d'you work that out?" asked Fred.

"Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was (supposed to be killed. Of course," she added broodingly, "that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don't seem to care how many people they finish off In lore they actually reach their victim."

Before anybody could respond to this ominous pronouncement, tin-dormitory doors opened again and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried up the ward. They had done no more than satisfy themselves that Ron would make a full recovery on their last visit to the ward; now Mrs. Weasley seized hold of Harry and hugged him very tightly. "Dumbledore's told us how you saved him with the bezoar," she sobbed. "Oh, Harry, what can we say? You saved Ginny . . . you saved Arthur , . . now you've saved Ron

"Don't be ... I didn't. . ." muttered Harry awkwardly. "Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it," Mr. Weasley said in a constricted voice. "Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky clay for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Harry."

Harry could not think of any reply to this and was almost glad when Madam Pomfrey reminded them that there were only supposed to be six visitors around Ron's bed; he and Hermione rose at once to leave and Hagrid decided to go with them, leaving Ron with his family.

"It's terrible," growled Hagrid into his beard, as the three of them walked back along the corridor to the marble staircase. "With this new security, and kids are still gettin' hurt. . . . Dumbledor's worried sick. . . . He don say much, but I can tell. . . ."

"Hasn't he got any ideas, Hagrid?" asked Hermione desperately.

"I suspect he's got hundreds of ideas, brain like his," said Hagrid. "But he doesn't know who sent that necklace nor put poison in that wine, or they'd've been caught, wouldn't they? What worries me," said Hagrid, lowering his voice and glancing over his shoulder (Harry, for good measure, checked the ceiling for Peeves), "is how long Hogwarts can stay open if kids are being attacked. Chamber of Secrets all over again, isn't it? There'll be panic, more parents taking their kids outta school, and next thing you know the board of governors ..."

Hagrid stopped talking as the ghost of a long-haired woman drifted serenely past, then resumed in a hoarse whisper, ". . . the board o' governors'll be talkin' about shuttin' us up fer good."

"Surely not?" said Hermione, looking worried.

"Gotta see it from their point o' view," said Hagrid heavily. "I mean, it's always bin a bit of a risk sendin a kid ter Hogwarts, hasn' it? Yer expect accidents, don' yeh, with hundreds of underage wizards all locked up tergether, but attempted murder, tha's t'iff'rent. 'S'no wonder Dumbledore's angry with Sn —"

Hagrid stopped in his tracks, a familiar, guilty expression on what was visible of his face above his tangled black beard.

"What?" said Harry quickly. "Dumbledore's angry with Snape?"

"I never said tha'," said Hagrid, though his look of panic could not have been a bigger giveaway. "Look at the time, it's gettin' on fer midnight, I need ter —"

"Hagrid, why is Dumbledore angry with Snape?" Harry asked loudly.

"Shhhh!" said Hagrid, looking both nervous and angry. "Don' shout stuff like that, Harry, d'yeh wan' me ter lose me job? Mind, I don' suppose yeh'd care, would yeh, not now yeh've given up Care of Mag—"

"Don't try and make me feel guilty, it wont work!" said Harry forcefully.
"What's Snape done?"

"I dunno, Harry, I shouldn'ta heard it at all! I — well, I was comin' outta the forest the other evenin' an' I overheard 'em talking— well, arguin'. Didn't like ter draw attention to meself, so I sorta skulked an tried not ter listen, but it was a — well, a heated discussion an' it wasn' easy ter block it out."

"Well?" Harry urged him, as Hagrid shuffled his enormous feet uneasily.

"Well — I jus' heard Snape sayin' Dumbledore took too much fer granted an maybe he — Snape — didn' wan' ter do it any more —"

"Do what?"

"I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin' a bit overworked, tha's all — anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed ter do it an' that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him. An' then he said summat abou' Snape makin' investigations in his House, in Slytherin. Well, there's nothin' strange abou' that!" Hagrid added hastily, as Harry and Hermione exchanged looks full of meaning. "All the Heads o' Houses were asked ter look inter that necklace business —"

"Yeah, but Dumbledore's not having rows with the rest of them, is he?"
said Harry.

"Look," Hagrid twisted his crossbow uncomfortably in his hands; there was a loud splintering sound and it snapped in two. "I know what yeh're like abou' Snape, Harry, an' I don' want yeh ter go readin' more inter this than there is."

"Look out," said Hermione tersely.

They turned just in time to see the shadow of Argus Filch looming over the wall behind them before the man himself turned the corner, hunchbacked, his jowls aquiver.

"Oho!" he wheezed. "Out of bed so late, this'll mean detention!"

"No it won', Filch," said Hagrid shortly. "They're with me, aren' they?"

"And what difference does that make?" asked Filch obnoxiously.

"I'm a ruddy teacher, aren' I, yeh sneakin' Squib!" said Hagrid, firing up at once.

There was a nasty hissing noise as Filch swelled with fury; Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself sinuously around Filch's skinny ankles.

"Get goin'," said Hagrid out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry did not need telling twice; he and Hermione both hurried off; Hagrid's and Filch's raised voices echoed behind them as they ran. They passed Peeves near the turning into Gryffindor Tower, but he was streaking happily toward the source of the yelling, cackling and calling,

When there's strife and when there's trouble

Call on Peevsie, he'll make double!

The Fat Lady was snoozing and not pleased to be woken, but swung forward grumpily to allow them to clamber into the mercifully peaceful and empty common room. It did not seem that people knew about Ron yet; Harry was very relieved: He had been interrogated enough that day. Hermione bade him good night and set off for the girls' dormitory. Harry, however, remained behind, taking a seat beside the fire and looking down into the dying embers.

So Dumbledore had argued with Snape. In spite of all he had told Harry, in spite of his insistence that he trusted Snape completely, he had lost his temper with him. . . . He did not think that Snape had tried hard enough to investigate the Slytherins ... or, perhaps, to investigate a single Slytherin: Malfoy?

Was it because Dumbledore did not want Harry to do anything foolish, to take matters into his own hands, that he had pretended there was nothing in Harry's suspicions? That seemed likely. It , might even be that Dumbledore did not want anything to distract Harry from their lessons, or from procuring that memory from Slughorn. Perhaps Dumbledore did not think it right to confide suspicions about his staff to sixteen-year-olds. ...

"There you are, Potter!"

Harry jumped to his feet in shock, his wand at the ready. He had been quite convinced that the common room was empty; he had not been at all prepared for a hulking figure to rise suddenly out of a distant chair. A closer look showed him that it was Cormac McLaggen.

"I've been waiting for you to come back," said McLaggen, disregarding Harry's drawn wand. "Must've fallen asleep. Look, I saw them taking Weasley up to the hospital wing earlier. Didn't look like he'll be fit for next week's match."

It took Harry a few moments to realize what McLaggen was talking about.

"Oh . . . right. . . Quidditch," he said, putting his wand back into the belt of his jeans and running a hand wearily through his hair. "Yeah ... he might not make it."

"Well, then, I'll be playing Keeper, won't I?" said McLaggen.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, I suppose so. ..."

He could not think of an argument against it; after all, McLaggen had certainly performed second-best in the trials.

"Excellent," said McLaggen in a satisfied voice. "So when's practice?"

"What? Oh . . . there's one tomorrow evening."

"Good. Listen, Potter, we should have a talk beforehand. I've got some ideas on strategy you might find useful."

"Right," said Harry unenthusiastically. "Well, I'll hear them tomorrow, then. I'm pretty tired now ... see you . . ."

The news that Ron had been poisoned spread quickly next day, but it did not cause the sensation that Katie's attack had done. People seemed to think that it might have been an accident, given that he had been in the Potions master's room at the time, and that as he had been given an antidote immediately there was no real harm done. In fact, the Gryffindors were generally much more interested in the upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, for many of them wanted to see Zacharias Smith, who played Chaser on the Hufflepuff team, punished soundly for his commentary during the opening match against Slytherin.

Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder's Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ordinary. And still there were those inexplicable times when Malfoy simply vanished from the map. . . .

But Harry did not get a lot of time to consider the problem, what with Quidditch practice, homework, and the fact that he was now being dogged wherever he went by Cormac McLaggen and Lavender Brown.

He could not decide which of them was more annoying. McLaggen kept up a constant stream of hints that he would make a better permanent Keeper for the team than Ron, and that now that Harry was seeing him play regularly he would surely come around to this way of thinking too; he was also keen to criticize the other players and provide Harry with detailed training schemes, so that more than once Harry was forced to remind him who was Captain.

Meanwhile, Lavender kept sidling up to Harry to discuss Ron, which Harry found almost more wearing than McLaggen's Quidditch lectures. At first, Lavender had been very annoyed that nobody had thought to tell her that Ron was in the hospital wing — "I mean, I am his girlfriend!" — but unfortunately she had now decided to forgive Harry this lapse of memory and was keen to have lots of in-depth chats with him about Ron's feelings, a most uncomfortable experience that Harry would have happily forgone.

"Look, why don't you talk to Ron about all this?" Harry asked, after a particularly long interrogation from Lavender that took in everything from precisely what Ron had said about her new dress robes to whether or not Harry thought that Ron considered his relationship with Lavender to be "serious."

"Well, I would, but he's always asleep when I go and see him!" said Lavender fretfully.

"Is he?" said Harry, surprised, for he had found Ron perfectly alert every time he had been up to the hospital wing, both highly interested in the news of Dumbledore and Snape's row and keen to abuse McLaggen as much as possible.

"Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?" Lavender demanded suddenly.

"Yeah, I think so. Well, they're friends, aren't they?" said Harry uncomfortably.

"Friends, don't make me laugh," said Lavender scornfully. "She didn't talk to him for weeks after he started going out with me! But I suppose she wants to make up with him now he's all interesting. ..."

"Would you call getting poisoned being interesting?" asked Harry. "Anyway — sorry, got to go — there's McLaggen coming for a talk about Quidditch," said Harry hurriedly, and he dashed sideways through a door pretending to be solid wall and sprinted down the shortcut that would take

him off to Potions where, thankfully, neither Lavender nor McLaggen could follow him.

On the morning of the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Harry dropped in on the hospital wing before heading down to the pitch. Ron was very agitated; Madam Pomfrey would not let him go down to watch the match, feeling it would overexcite him.

"So how's McLaggen shaping up?" he asked Harry nervously, apparently forgetting that he had already asked the same question twice.

"I've told you," said Harry patiently, "he could be world-class and I wouldn't want to keep him. He keeps trying to tell everyone what to do, he thinks he could play every position better than the rest of us. I can't wait to be shot of him. And speaking of getting shot of people," Harry added, getting to his feet and picking up his Firebolt, "will you stop pretending to be asleep when Lavender comes to see you? She's driving me mad as well."

"Oh," said Ron, looking sheepish. "Yeah. All right."

"If you don't want to go out with her anymore, just tell her," said Harry.

"Yeah . . . well. . . it's not that easy, is it?" said Ron. He paused. "Hermione going to look in before the match?" he added casually.

"No, she's already gone down to the pitch with Ginny."

"Oh," said Ron, looking rather glum. "Right. Well, good luck. Hope you hammer McLag — I mean, Smith."

"I'll try," said Harry, shouldering his broom. "See you after the match."

He hurried down through the deserted corridors; the whole school was outside, either already seated in the stadium or heading down toward it. He was looking out of the windows he passed, trying to gauge how much wind they were facing, when a noise ahead made him glance up and he saw Malfoy walking toward him, accompanied by two girls, both of whom looked sulky and resentful.

Malfoy stopped short at the sight of Harry, then gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

"Where're you going?" Harry demanded.

"Yeah, I'm really going to tell you, because it's your business, Potter," sneered Malfoy. "You'd better hurry up, they'll be waiting for 'the Chosen Captain' — 'the Boy Who Scored' — whatever they call you these days."

One of the girls gave an unwilling giggle. Harry stared at her. She blushed. Malfoy pushed past Harry and she and her friend followed at a trot, turning the corner and vanishing from view.

Harry stood rooted on the spot and watched them disappear. This was infuriating; he was already cutting it fine to get to the match on time and yet

there was Malfoy, skulking off while the rest of the school was absent: Harry's best chance yet of discovering what Malfoy was up to. The silent seconds trickled past, and Harry remained where he was, frozen, gazing at the place where Malfoy had vanished. . . .

"Where have you been?" demanded Ginny, as Harry sprinted into the changing rooms. The whole team was changed and ready; Coote and Peakes, the Beaters, were both hitting their clubs nervously against their legs.

"I met Malfoy," Harry told her quietly, as he pulled his scarlet robes over his head.

"So I wanted to know how come he's up at the castle with a couple of girlfriends while everyone else is down here. ..."

"Does it matter right now?"

"Well, I'm not likely to find out, am I?" said Harry, seizing his Firebolt and pushing his glasses straight. "Come on then!"

And without another word, he marched out onto the pitch to deafening cheers and boos.

There was little wind; the clouds were patchy; every now and then there were dazzling flashes of bright sunlight.

"Tricky conditions!" McLaggen said bracingly to the team. "Coote, Peakes, you'll want to fly out of the sun, so they don't see you coming —"

"I'm the Captain, McLaggen, shut up giving them instructions," said Harry angrily. "Just get up by the goal posts!"

Once McLaggen had marched off, Harry turned to Coote and Peakes.

"Make sure you do fly out of the sun," he told them grudgingly.

He shook hands with the Hufflepuff Captain, and then, on Madam Hooch's whistle, kicked off and rose into the air, higher than the rest of his team, streaking around the pitch in search of the Snitch. If he could catch it good and early, there might be a chance he could get back up to the castle, seize the Marauder's Map, and find out what Malfoy was doing. . . .

"And that's Smith of Hufflepuff with the Quaffle," said a dreamy voice, echoing over the grounds. "He did the commentary last time, of course, and Ginny Weasley flew into him, I think probably on purpose, it looked like it. Smith was being quite rude about Gryffindor, I expect he regrets that now he's playing them — oh, look, he's lost the Quaffle, Ginny took it from him, I do like her, she's very nice. ..."

Harry stared down at the commentator's podium. Surely nobody in their right mind would have let Luna Lovegood commentate? But even from above there was no mistaking that long, dirty-blond hair, nor the necklace of butterbeer corks. . . . Beside Luna, Professor McGonagall was looking

slightly uncomfortable, as though she was indeed having second thoughts about this appointment.

". . . but now that big Hufflepuff player's got the Quaffle from , her, I can't remember his name, it's something like Bibble — no, Buggins —"

"It's Cadwallader!" said Professor McGonagall loudly from beside Luna. The crowd laughed.

Harry stared around for the Snitch; there was no sign of it. Moments later, Cadwallader scored. McLaggen had been shouting criticism at Ginny for allowing the Quaffle out of her possession, with the result that he had not noticed the large red ball soaring past his right ear.

"McLaggen, will you pay attention to what you're supposed to be doing and leave everyone else alone!" bellowed Harry, wheeling around to face his Keeper.

"You're not setting a great example!" McLaggen shouted back, red-faced and furious.

"And Harry Potter's now having an argument with his Keeper," said Luna serenely, while both Hufflepuffs and Slytherins below in the crowd cheered and jeered. "I don't think that'll help him find the Snitch, but maybe it's a clever ruse. ..."

Swearing angrily, Harry spun round and set off around the pitch again, scanning the skies for some sign of the tiny, winged golden ball.

Ginny and Demelza scored a goal apiece, giving the red-and-gold-clad supporters below something to cheer about. Then Cadwallader scored again, making things level, but Luna did not seem to have noticed; she appeared singularly uninterested in such mundane things as the score, and kept attempting to draw the crowd's attention to such things as interestingly shaped clouds and the possibility that Zacharias Smith, who had so far failed to maintain possession of the Quaffle for longer than a minute, was suffering from something called "Loser's Lurgy."

"Seventy-forty to Hufflepuff!" barked Professor McGonagall into Luna's megaphone.

"Is it, already?" said Luna vaguely. "Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper's got hold of one of the Beater's bats."

Harry spun around in midair. Sure enough, McLaggen, for reasons best known to himself, had pulled Peakes's bat from him and appeared to be demonstrating how to hit a Bludger toward an oncoming Cadwallader.

"Will you give him back his bat and get back to the goal posts!" roared Harry, pelting toward McLaggen just as McLaggen took a ferocious swipe at the Bludger and mishit it.

A blinding, sickening pain ... a flash of light. . . distant screams . . . and the sensation of falling down a long tunnel. . .

And the next thing Harry knew, he was lying in a remarkably warm and comfortable bed and looking up at a lamp that was throwing a circle of golden light onto a shadowy ceiling. He raised his head awkwardly. There on his left was a familiar-looking, freckly, red-haired person.

"Nice of you to drop in," said Ron, grinning.

Harry blinked and looked around. Of course: He was in the hospital wing. The sky outside was indigo streaked with crimson. The match must have finished hours ago ... as had any hope of cornering Malfoy. Harry's head felt strangely heavy; he raised a hand and felt a stiff turban of bandages.

"What happened?"

"Cracked skull," said Madam Pomfrey, bustling up and pushing him back against his pillows. "Nothing to worry about, I mended it at once, but I'm keeping you in overnight. You shouldn't over exert yourself for a few hours."

"I don't want to stay here overnight," said Harry angrily, sitting up and throwing back his covers. "I want to find McLaggen and kill him."

"I'm afraid that would come under the heading of 'overexertion,'" said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him firmly back onto the bed and raising her

wand in a threatening manner. "You will stay here until I discharge you, Potter, or I shall call the headmaster."

She bustled back into her office, and Harry sank back into his pillows, fuming.

"D'you know how much we lost by?" he asked Ron through clenched teeth.

"Well, yeah I do," said Ron apologetically. "Final score was three hundred and twenty to sixty."

"Brilliant," said Harry savagely. "Really brilliant! When I get hold of McLaggen —"

"You don't want to get hold of him, he's the size of a troll," said

Ron reasonably. "Personally, I think there's a lot to be said for hexing him with that toenail thing of the Prince's. Anyway, the rest of the team might've dealt with him before you get out of here, they're not happy. ..."

There was a note of badly suppressed glee in Rons voice; Harry could tell he was nothing short of thrilled that McLaggen had messed up so badly. Harry lay there, staring up at the patch of light on the ceiling, his recently mended skull not hurting, precisely, but feeling slightly tender underneath all the bandaging.

"I could hear the match commentary from here," said Ron, his voice now shaking with laughter. "I hope Luna always commentates from now on. . . . Loser's Lurgy ..."

But Harry was still too angry to see much humor in the situation, and after a while Ron's snorts subsided.

"Ginny came in to visit while you were unconscious," he said, after a long pause, and Harry's imagination zoomed into overdrive, rapidly constructing a scene in which Ginny, weeping over his lifeless form, confessed her feelings of deep attraction to him while Ron gave them his blessing. . . ."She reckons you only just arrived on time for the match. How come? You left here early enough."

"Oh . . ." said Harry, as the scene in his mind's eye imploded. "Yeah . . . well, I saw Malfoy sneaking off with a couple of girls who didn't look like they wanted to be with him, and that's the second time he's made sure he isn't down on the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the school; he skipped the last match too, remember?" Harry sighed. "Wish I'd followed him now, the match was such a fiasco. . . ."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron sharply. "You couldn't have missed a Quidditch match just to follow Malfoy, you're the Captain!"

"I want to know what he's up to," said Harry. "And don't tell me it's all in my head, not after what I overheard between him and Snape —"

"I never said it was all in your head," said Ron, hoisting himself up on an elbow in turn and frowning at Harry, "but there's no rule saying only one person at a time can be plotting anything in this place! You're getting a bit obsessed with Malfoy, Harry. I mean, thinking about missing a match just to follow him ..."

"I want to catch him at it!" said Harry in frustration. "I mean, where's he going when he disappears off the map?"

"I dunno . . . Hogsmeade?" suggested Ron, yawning.

"I've never seen him going along any of the secret passageway on the map. I thought they were being watched now anyway?"

"Well then, I dunno," said Ron.

Silence fell between them. Harry stared up at the circle of lamp light above him, thinking. . . .

If only he had Rufus Scrimgeour's power, he would have been able to set a tail upon Malfoy, but unfortunately Harry did not have an office full of Aurors at his command. . . . He thought fleetingly of trying to set something up with the D.A., but there again was the problem that people would be missed from lessons; most of them, after all, still had full schedules. . . .

There was a low, rumbling snore from Ron's bed. After a while Madam Pomfrey came out of her office, this time wearing a thick dressing gown. It

was easiest to feign sleep; Harry rolled over onto his side and listened to all the curtains closing themselves as she waved her wand. The lamps dimmed, and she returned to her office; he heard the door click behind her and knew that she was off to bed.

This was, Harry reflected in the darkness, the third time that he had been brought to the hospital wing because of a Quidditch injury. Last time he had fallen off his broom due to the presence of dementors around the pitch, and the time before that, all the bones had been removed from his arm by the incurably inept Professor Lockhart. . . . That had been his most painful injury by far ... he remembered the agony of regrowing an armful of bones in one night, a discomfort not eased by the arrival of an unexpected visitor in the middle of the —

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart pounding, his bandage turban askew. He had the solution at last: There was a way to have Malfoy followed — how could he have forgotten, why hadn't he thought

of it before?

But the question was, how to call him? What did you do? Quietly, tentatively, Harry spoke into the darkness.

"Kreacher?"

There was a very loud crack, and the sounds of scuffling and squeaks filled the silent room. Ron awoke with a yelp.

"What's going — ?"

Harry pointed his wand hastily at the door of Madam Pomfrey's office and muttered, "Muffliato!" so that she would not come running. Then he scrambled to the end of his bed for a better look at

what was going on.

Two house-elves were rolling around on the floor in the middle of the dormitory, one wearing a shrunken maroon jumper and several woolly hats, the other, a filthy old rag strung over his hips like a loincloth. Then there was another loud bang, and Peeves the Poltergeist appeared in midair above the wrestling elves.

"I was watching that, Potty!" he told Harry indignantly, pointing at the fight below, before letting out a loud cackle. "Look at the ickle creatures squabbling, bitey bitey, punchy punchy —"

"Kreacher will not insult Harry Potter in front of Dobby, no he won't, or Dobby will shut Kreacher's mouth for him!" cried Dobby in a high-pitched voice.

"— kicky, scratchy!" cried Peeves happily, now pelting bits of chalk at the elves to enrage them further. "Tweaky, pokey!"

"Kreacher will say what he likes about his master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, what would poor Kreacher's mistress say — ?"

Exactly what Kreacher's mistress would have said they did not find out, for at that moment Dobby sank his knobby little fist into Kreacher's mouth and knocked out half of his teeth. Harry and Ron both leapt out of their beds and wrenched the two elves apart, though they continued to try and kick and punch each other, egged on by Peeves, who swooped around the lamp squealing, "Stick your fingers up his nosey, draw his cork and pull his earsies —"

Harry aimed his wand at Peeves and said, "Langlock!" Peeves clutched at his throat, gulped, then swooped from the room making obscene gestures but unable to speak, owing to the fact that his tongue had just glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

"Nice one," said Ron appreciatively, lifting Dobby into the air so that his flailing limbs no longer made contact with Kreacher. "That was another Prince hex, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," said Harry, twisting Kreacher's wizened arm into a half nelson. "Right — I'm forbidding you to fight each other! Well, Kreacher, you're forbidden to fight Dobby. Dobby, I know I'm not allowed to give you orders —"

"Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry Potter wants him to do!" said Dobby, tears now streaming down his shriveled little face onto his jumper.

"Okay then," said Harry, and he and Ron both released the elves, who fell to the floor but did not continue fighting.

"Master called me?" croaked Kreacher, sinking into a bow even as he gave Harry a look that plainly wished him a painful death.

"Yeah, I did," said Harry, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey's office door to check that the Muffliato spell was still working; there was no sign that she had heard any of the commotion. "I've got a job for you."

"Kreacher will do whatever Master wants," said Kreacher, sinking so low that his lips almost touched his gnarled toes, "because Kreacher has no choice, but Kreacher is ashamed to have such a master, yes —"

"Dobby will do it, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, his tennis-ball-sized eyes still swimming in tears. "Dobby would be honored to help Harry Potter!"

"Come to think of it, it would be good to have both of you," said Harry. "Okay then ... I want you to tail Draco Malfoy."

Ignoring the look of mingled surprise and exasperation on Ron's face, Harry went on, "I want to know where he's going, who he's meeting, and what he's doing. I want you to follow him around the clock."

"Yes, Harry Potter!" said Dobby at once, his great eyes shining with excitement. "And if Dobby does it wrong, Dobby will throw himself off the topmost tower, Harry Potter!"

"There won't be any need for that," said Harry hastily.

"Master wants me to follow the youngest of the Malfoys?" croaked Kreacher. "Master wants me to spy upon the pure-blood great-nephew of my old mistress?"

"That's the one," said Harry, foreseeing a great danger and determining to prevent it immediately. "And you're forbidden to tip him off, Kreacher, or to show him what you're up to, or to talk to him at all, or to write him messages or ... or to contact him in any way. Got it?"

He thought he could see Kreacher struggling to see a loophole in the instructions he had just been given and waited. After a moment or two, and to Harry's great satisfaction, Kreacher bowed deeply again and said, with bitter resentment, "Master thinks of everything, and Kreacher must obey him even though Kreacher would much rather be the servant of the Malfoy boy, oh yes. . . ."

"That's settled, then," said Harry. "I'll want regular reports, but make sure I'm not surrounded by people when you turn up. Ron and Hermione are okay. And don't tell anyone what you're doing. Just stick to Malfoy like a couple of wart plasters."

Chapter 20: Lord Voldemort's Request

Harry and Ron left the hospital wing first thing on Monday morning, restored to full health by the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey and now able to enjoy the benefits of having been knocked out and poisoned, the best of which was that Hermione was friends with Ron again. Hermione even escorted them down to breakfast, bringing with her the news that Ginny had argued with Dean. The drowsing creature in Harry's chest suddenly raised its head, sniffing the air hopefully.

"What did they row about?" he asked, trying to sound casual as they turned onto a seventh-floor corridor that was deserted but for a very small girl who had been examining a tapestry of trolls in tutus. She looked terrified at the sight of the approaching sixth years and dropped the heavy brass scales she was carrying.

"It's all right!" said Hermione kindly, hurrying forward to help her. "Here ..."

She tapped the broken scales with her wand and said, "Reparo." The girl did not say thank you, but remained rooted to the spot as they passed and watched them out of sight; Ron glanced back at her.

"I swear they're getting smaller," he said.

"Never mind her," said Harry, a little impatiently. "What did Ginny and Dean row about, Hermione?"

"Oh, Dean was laughing about McLaggen hitting that Bludger at you," said Hermione.

"It must've looked funny," said Ron reasonably. "It didn't look funny at all!" said Hermione hotly. "It looked terrible and if Coote and Peakes hadn't caught Harry he could have been very badly hurt!"

"Yeah, well, there was no need for Ginny and Dean to split up over it," said Harry, still trying to sound casual. "Or are they still together?"

"Yes, they are — but why are you so interested?" asked Hermione, giving Harry a sharp look.

"I just don't want my Quidditch team messed up again!" he said hastily, but Hermione continued to look suspicious, and he was most relieved when a voice behind them called, "Harry!" giving him an excuse to turn his back on her. "Oh, hi, Luna."

- "I went to the hospital wing to find you," said Luna, rummaging in her bag. "But they said you'd left..."

She thrust what appeared to be a green onion, a large spotted toadstool, and a considerable amount of what looked like cat litter into Ron's hands, finally pulling out a rather grubby scroll of parchment that she handed to Harry.

". . . I've been told to give you this."

It was a small roll of parchment, which Harry recognized at once as another invitation to a lesson with Dumbledore.

"Tonight," he told Ron and Hermione, once he had unrolled it.

"Nice commentary last match!" said Ron to Luna as she took back the green onion, the toadstool, and the cat litter. Luna smiled vaguely.

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" she said. "Everyone says I was dreadful."

"No, I'm serious!" said Ron earnestly. "I can't remember enjoying commentary more! What is this, by the way?" he added, holding the onionlike object up to eye level.

"Oh, it's a Gurdyroot," she said, stuffing the cat litter and the toadstool back into her bag. "You can keep it if you like, I've got a few of them. They're really excellent for warding off Gulping Plimpies." And she walked away, leaving Ron chortling, still clutching the Gurdyroot.

"You know, she's grown on me, Luna," he said, as they set off again for the Great Hall. "I know she's insane, but it's in a good —" He stopped talking very suddenly. Lavender Brown was standing at the foot of the marble staircase looking thunderous. "Hi," said Ron nervously.

"C'mon," Harry muttered to Hermione, and they sped past, though not before they had heard Lavender say, "Why didn't you tell me you were getting out today? And why was she with you?"

Ron looked both sulky and annoyed when he appeared at breakfast half an hour later, and though he sat with Lavender, Harry did not see them exchange a word all the time they were together. Hermione was acting as though she was quite oblivious to all of this, but once or twice Harry saw an inexplicable smirk cross her face. All that day she seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and that evening in the common room she even consented to look over (in other words, finish writing) Harry's Herbology essay, something she had been resolutely refusing to do up to this point, because she had known that Harry would then let Ron copy his work.

"Thanks a lot, Hermione," said Harry, giving her a hasty pat on the back as he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. "Listen, I've got to hurry or I'll be late for Dumbledore. ..."

She did not answer, but merely crossed out a few of his feebler sentences in a weary sort of way. Grinning, Harry hurried out through the portrait hole and off to the headmasters office. The gargoyle leapt aside at the mention of toffee eclairs, and Harry took the spiral staircase two steps at a time, knocking on the door just as a clock within chimed eight.

"Enter," called Dumbledore, but as Harry put out a hand to push the door, it was wrenched open from inside. There stood Professor Trelawney.

"Aha!" she cried, pointing dramatically at Harry as she blinked at him through her magnifying spectacles.

"So this is the reason I am to be thrown unceremoniously from your office, Dumbledore!"

"My dear Sybill," said Dumbledore in a slightly exasperated voice, "there is no question of throwing you unceremoniously from anywhere, but Harry does have an appointment, and I really don't think there is any more to be said —"

"Very well," said Professor Trelawney, in a deeply wounded voice. "If you will not banish the usurping nag, so be it. ..."

Perhaps I shall find a school where my talents are better appreciated. ..."

She pushed past Harry and disappeared down the spiral staircase; they heard her stumble halfway down, and Harry guessed that she had tripped over one of her trailing shawls.

"Please close the door and sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, sounding rather tired.

Harry obeyed, noticing as he took his usual seat in front of Dumbledore's desk that the Pensieve lay between them once more, as did two more tiny crystal bottles full of swirling memory.

"Professor Trelawney still isn't happy Firenze is teaching, then?" Harry asked.

"No," said Dumbledore, "Divination is turning out to be much more trouble than I could have foreseen, never having studied the subject myself. I cannot ask Firenze to return to the forest, where he is now an outcast, nor can I ask Sybill Trelawney to leave. Between ourselves, she has no idea of the danger she would be in outside the castle. She does not know — and I think it would be unwise to enlighten her — that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see."

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh, then said, "But never mind my staffing problems. We have much more important matters to discuss. Firstly — have you managed the task I set you at the end of our previous lesson?"

"Ah," said Harry, brought up short. What with Apparition lessons and Quidditch and Ron being poisoned and getting his skull cracked and his determination to find out what Draco Malfoy was up to, Harry had almost forgotten about the memory Dumbledore had asked him to extract from Professor Slughorn. "Well, I asked Professor Slughorn about it at the end of Potions, sir, but, er, he wouldn't give it to me." There was a little silence.

"I see," said Dumbledore eventually, peering at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles and giving Harry the usual sensation that he was being X-rayed. "And you feel that you have exerted your very best efforts in this matter, do you? That you have exercised all of your considerable ingenuity?"

That you have left no depth of cunning unplumbed in your quest to retrieve the memory?"

"Well," Harry stalled, at a loss for what to say next. His single attempt to get hold of the memory suddenly seemed embarrassingly feeble. "Well . . . the day Ron swallowed love potion by mistake I took him to Professor Slughorn. I thought maybe if I got Professor Slughorn in a good enough mood —" "And did that work?" asked Dumbledore. "Well, no, sir, because Ron got poisoned —" "— which, naturally, made you forget all about trying to retrieve the memory; I would have expected nothing else, while your best friend was in danger. Once it became clear that Mr. Weasley was going to make a full recovery, however, I would have hoped that you returned to the task I set you. I thought I made it clear to you how very important that memory is. Indeed, I did my best to impress upon you that it is the most crucial memory of all and that we will be wasting our time without it."

A hot, prickly feeling of shame spread from the top of Harry's head all the way down his body. Dumbledore had not raised his voice, he did not even sound angry, but Harry would have preferred him to yell; this cold disappointment was worse than anything.

"Sir," he said, a little desperately, "it isn't that I wasn't bothered or anything, I've just had other — other things . . ."

"Other things on your mind," Dumbledore finished the sentence for him. "I see."

Silence fell between them again, the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced with Dumbledore; it seemed to go on and on, punctuated only by the little grunting snores of the portrait of Armando Dippet over Dumbledore's head. Harry felt strangely diminished, as though he had shrunk a little since he had entered the room. When he could stand it no longer he said, "Professor Dumbledore, I'm really sorry. I should have done more. ... I should have realized you wouldn't have asked me to do it if it wasn't really important."

"Thank you for saying that, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "May I hope, then, that you will give this matter higher priority from now on? There will be little point in our meeting after tonight unless we have that memory."

"I'll do it, sir, I'll get it from him," he said earnestly.

"Then we shall say no more about it just now," said Dumbledore more kindly, "but continue with our story where we left off. You remember where that was?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry quickly. "Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents and made it look as though his Uncle Morfin did it. Then he went back to Hogwarts and he asked ... he asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Now, you will remember, I hope, that I told you at the very outset of these meetings of ours that we would be entering the realms of guesswork and speculation?"

“Yes, sir”.

"Thus far, as I hope you agree, I have shown you reasonably firm sources of fact for my deductions as to what Voldemort did until the age of seventeen?"

Harry nodded.

"But now, Harry," said Dumbledore, "now things become murkier and stranger. If it was difficult to find evidence about the boy Riddle, it has been almost impossible to find anyone prepared to reminisce about the man Voldemort. In fact, I doubt whether there is a soul alive, apart from himself, who could give us a full account of his life since he left Hogwarts. However, I have two last memories that I would like to share with you." Dumbledore indicated the two little crystal bottles gleaming beside the Pensieve. "I shall then be glad of your opinion as to whether the conclusions I have drawn from them seem likely."

The idea that Dumbledore valued his opinion this highly made Harry feel even more deeply ashamed that he had failed in the task of retrieving the Horcrux memory, and he shifted guiltily in his seat as Dumbledore raised the first of the two bottles to the light and examined it.

"I hope you are not tired of diving into other people's memories, for they are curious recollections, these two," he said. "This first one came from a

very old house-elf by the name of Hokey. Before we see what Hokey witnessed, I must quickly recount how Lord Voldemort left Hogwarts.

"He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he had taken. All around him, his classmates were deciding which jobs they were to pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom Riddle, prefect, Head Boy, winner of the Award for Special Services to the School. I know that several teachers, Professor Slughorn amongst them, suggested that he join the Ministry of Magic, offered to set up appointments, put him in touch with useful contacts. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes."

"At Borgin and Burkes?" Harry repeated, stunned.

"At Borgin and Burkes," repeated Dumbledore calmly. "I think you will see what attractions the place held for him when we have entered Hokey's memory. But this was not Voldemort's first choice of job. Hardly anyone knew of it at the time — I was one of the few in whom the then headmaster confided — but Voldemort first approached Professor Dippet and asked whether he could remain at Hogwarts as a teacher."

"He wanted to stay here? Why?" asked Harry, more amazed still.

"I believe he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Professor Dippet," said Dumbledore. "Firstly, and very importantly, Voldemort was, I believe, more attached to this school than he has ever been

to a person. Hogwarts was where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had felt at home."

Harry felt slightly uncomfortable at these words, for this was exactly how he felt about Hogwarts too.

"Secondly, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic. Undoubtedly Voldemort had penetrated many more of its secrets than most of the students who pass through the place, but he may have felt that there were still mysteries to unravel, stores of magic to tap.

"And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have had great power and influence over young witches and wizards. Perhaps he had gained the idea from Professor Slughorn, the teacher with whom he was on best terms, who had demonstrated how influential a role a teacher can play. I do not imagine for an instant that Voldemort envisaged spending the rest of his life at Hogwarts, but I do think that he saw it as a useful recruiting ground, and a place where he might begin to build himself an army."

"But he didn't get the job, sir?"

"No, he did not. Professor Dippet told him that he was too young at eighteen, but invited him to reapply in a few years, if he still wished to teach."

"How did you feel about that, sir?" asked Harry hesitantly. "Deeply uneasy," said Dumbledore. "I had advised Armando against the appointment

— I did not give the reasons I have given you, for Professor Dippet was very fond of Voldemort and convinced of his honesty. But I did not want Lord Voldemort back at this school, and especially not in a position of power."

"Which job did he want, sir? What subject did he want to teach?"

Somehow, Harry knew the answer even before Dumbledore gave it.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was being taught at the time by an old Professor by the name of Galatea Merrythought, who had been at Hogwarts for nearly fifty years.

"So Voldemort went off to Borgin and Burkes, and all the staff who had admired him said what a waste it was, a brilliant young wizard like that, working in a shop. However, Voldemort was no mere assistant. Polite and handsome and clever, he was soon given particular jobs of the type that only exist in a place like Borgin and Burkes, which specializes, as you know, Harry, in objects with unusual and powerful properties. Voldemort was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures for sale by the partners, and he was, by all accounts, unusually gifted at doing this."

"I'll bet he was," said Harry, unable to contain himself.

"Well, quite," said Dumbledore, with a faint smile. "And now it is time to hear from Hokey the house-elf, who worked for a very old, very rich witch by the name of Hepzibah Smith."

Dumbledore tapped a bottle with his wand, the cork flew out, and he tipped the swirling memory into the Pensieve, saying as he did so, "After you, Harry."

Harry got to his feet and bent once more over the rippling silver contents of the stone basin until his face touched them. He tumbled through dark nothingness and landed in a sitting room in front of an immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink set of robes that flowed all around her, giving her the look of a melting iced cake. She was looking into a small jeweled mirror and dabbing rouge onto her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff, while the tiniest and oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen laced her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers.

"Hurry up, Hokey!" said Hepzibah imperiously. "He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never been late yet!"

She tucked away her powder puff as the house-elf straightened up. The top of the elf's head barely reached the seat of Hepzibah's chair, and her papery skin hung off her frame just like the crisp linen sheet she wore draped like a toga.

"How do I look?" said Hepzibah, turning her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror.

"Lovely, madam," squeaked Hokey.

Harry could only assume that it was down in Hokey's contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question, because Hepzibah Smith looked a long way from lovely in his opinion.

A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and elf jumped.

"Quick, quick, he's here, Hokey!" cried Hepzibah and the elf scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was difficult to see how anybody could navigate their way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: There were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases full of gold-embossed books, shelves of orbs and celestial globes, and many flourishing potted plants in brass containers. In fact, the room looked like a cross between a magical antique shop and a conservatory.

The house-elf returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man Harry had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing as Voldemort. He was plainly dressed in a black suit; his hair was a little longer than it had been at school and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him; he looked more handsome than ever. He picked his way through the cramped room with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over Hepzibah's fat little hand, brushing it with his lips.

"I brought you flowers," he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!" squealed old Hepzibah, though Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing ready on the nearest little

table. "You do spoil this old lady, Tom. ... Sit down, sit down. . . . Where's Hokey? Ah ..."

The house-elf had come dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow.

"Help yourself, Tom," said Hepzibah, "I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times. ..."

Voldemort smiled mechanically and Hepzibah simpered.

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?" she asked, bat-ringing her lashes.

"Mr. Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armor," said Voldemort. "Five hundred Galleons, he feels it is a more than fair —"

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!" pouted Hepzibah.

"I am ordered here because of them," said Voldemort quietly. "I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr. Burke wishes me to inquire —"

"Oh, Mr. Burke, phooey!" said Hepzibah, waving a little hand. "I've something to show you that I've never shown Mr. Burke! Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won't tell Mr. Burke I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you'll appreciate it for its history, not how many Galleons you can get for it."

"I'd be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me," said Voldemort quietly, and Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle.

"I had Hokey bring it out for me . . . Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr. Riddle our finest treasure. ... In fact, bring both, while you're at it. ..."

"Here, madam," squeaked the house-elf, and Harry saw two leather boxes, one on top of the other, moving across the room as if of their own volition, though he knew the tiny elf was holding them over her head as she wended her way between tables, ***pouffes, and footstools.

"Now," said Hepzibah happily, taking the boxes from the elf, laying them in her lap, and preparing to open the topmost one, "I think you'll like this, Tom. . . . Oh, if my family knew I was showing you. . . . They can't wait to get their hands on this!"

She opened the lid. Harry edged forward a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with two finely wrought handles.

"I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!" whispered Hepzibah, and Voldemort stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted the cup by one handle out of its snug silken wrappings. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. His greedy expression was curiously mirrored on Hepzibah's face, except that her tiny eyes were fixed upon Voldemort's handsome features.

"A badger," murmured Voldemort, examining the engraving upon the cup. "Then this was . . . ?"

"Helga Hufflepuff's, as you very well know, you clever boy!" said Hepzibah, leaning forward with a loud creaking of corsets and actually pinching his hollow cheek. "Didn't I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn't it? And all sorts of powers it's supposed to possess too, but I haven't tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here. . . ."

She hooked the cup back off Voldemort's long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it carefully back into position to notice the shadow that crossed Voldemort's face as the cup was taken away.

"Now then," said Hepzibah happily, "where's Hokey? Oh yes, there you are — take that away now, Hokey."

The elf obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap.

"I think you'll like this even more, Tom," she whispered. "Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see. . . . Of course, Burke knows I've got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone. . . ."

She slid back the fine filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket.

Voldemort reached out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it.

"Slytherin's mark," he said quietly, as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine S.

"That's right!" said Hepzibah, delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed. "I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn't let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value —"

There was no mistaking it this time: Voldemort's eyes flashed scarlet at the words, and Harry saw his knuckles whiten on the locket's chain.

"— I daresay Burke paid her a pittance but there you are. . . . Pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe. . . ."

She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort was not going to let go of it, but then it had slid through his fingers and was back in its red velvet cushion.

“So there you are, Tom, clear, and I hope you enjoyed that!”

She looked him full in the face and for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter.

"Are you all right, dear?"

"Oh yes," said Voldemort quietly. "Yes, I'm very well. ..."

“I thought — but a trick of the light, I suppose —” said Hepzibah, looking unnerved, and Harry guessed that she too had seen the momentary red gleam in Voldemort's eyes. "Here, Hokey, take these away and lock them up again. ... The usual enchantments..."

"Time to leave, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly, and as the in tie elf bobbed away bearing the boxes, Dumbledore grasped Harry once again above the elbow and together they rose up through oblivion and back to Dumbledore's office.

"Hepzibah Smith died two days after that little scene," said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and indicating that Harry should do the same. "Hokey the house-elf was convicted by the Ministry of poisoning her mistress's evening cocoa by accident."

"No way!" said Harry angrily.

"I see we are of one mind," said Dumbledore. "Certainly, there are many similarities between this death and that of the Riddles. In both cases, somebody else took the blame, someone who had a clear memory of having caused the death —" "Hokey confessed?"

"She remembered putting something in her mistress's cocoa that turned out not to be sugar, but a lethal and little-known poison, said Dumbledore. "It was concluded that she had not meant to do it, but being old and confused —"

"Voldemort modified her memory, just like he did with Morfin!" "Yes, that is my conclusion too," said Dumbledore. "And, just as with Morfin, the Ministry was predisposed to suspect Hokey —"

"— because she was a house-elf," said Harry. He had rarely felt more in sympathy with the society Hermione had set up, S.P.E.W. "Precisely," said Dumbledore. "She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Ministry bothered to inquire further. As in the case of Morfin, by the time I traced her and managed to extract this memory, her life was almost over — but her memory, of course, proves nothing except that Voldemort knew of the existence of the cup and the locket.

"By the time Hokey was convicted, Hepzibah's family had realized that two of her greatest treasures were missing. It took them a while to be sure of

this, for she had many hiding places, having always guarded her collection most jealously. But before they were sure beyond doubt that the cup and the locket were both gone, the assistant who had worked at Borgin and Burkes, the young man who had visited Hepzibah so regularly and charmed her so well, had resigned his post and vanished. His superiors had no idea where he had gone; they were as surprised as anyone at his disappearance. And that was the last that was seen or heard of Tom Riddle for a very long time.

"Now," said Dumbledore, "if you don't mind, Harry, I want to pause once more to draw your attention to certain points of our story. Voldemort had committed another murder; whether it was his first since he killed the Riddles, I do not know, but I think it was. This time, as you will have seen, he killed not for revenge, but for gain. He wanted the two fabulous trophies that poor, besotted, old woman showed him. Just as he had once robbed the other children at his orphanage, just as he had stolen his Uncle Morfin's ring, so he ran off now with Hepzibah's cup and locket."

"But," said Harry, frowning, "it seems mad. . . . Risking everything, throwing away his job, just for those . . ."

"Mad to you, perhaps, but not to Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "I hope you will understand in due course exactly what those objects meant to him, Harry, but you must admit that it is not difficult to imagine that he saw the locket, at least, as rightfully his." "The locket maybe," said Harry, "but why take the cup as well?"

"It had belonged to another of Hogwarts's founders," said Dumbledore. "I think he still felt a great pull toward the school and that he could not resist an object so steeped in Hogwarts history. There were other reasons, I think. ... I hope to be able to demonstrate them to you in due course.

"And now for the very last recollection I have to show you, at least until you manage to retrieve Professor Slughorn's memory for us. Ten years separates Hokey's memory and this one, ten years during which we can only guess at what Lord Voldemort was doing. . . ." Harry got to his feet once more as Dumbledore emptied the last memory into the Pensieve.

"Whose memory is it?" he asked. "Mine," said Dumbledore.

And Harry dived after Dumbledore through the shifting silver mass, landing in the very office he had just left. There was Fawkes slumbering happily on his perch, and there behind the desk was Dumbledore, who looked very similar to the Dumbledore standing beside Harry, though both hands were whole and undamaged and his face was, perhaps, a little less lined. The one difference between the present-day office and this one was that it was snowing in the past; bluish flecks were drifting past the window in the dark and building up on the outside ledge.

The younger Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for something, and sure enough, moments after their arrival, there was a knock on the door and he said, "Enter."

Harry let out a hastily stifled gasp. Voldemort had entered the room. His features were not those Harry had seen emerge from the great stone cauldron almost two years ago: They were not as snake-like, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. He was wearing a long black cloak, and his face was as pale as the snow glistening on his shoulders.

The Dumbledore behind the desk showed no sign of surprise. Evidently this visit had been made by appointment.

"Good evening, Tom," said Dumbledore easily. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," said Voldemort, and he took the seat to which Dumbledore had gestured — the very seat, by the looks of it, that Harry had just vacated in the present. "I heard that you had become headmaster," he said, and his voice was slightly higher and colder than it had been. "A worthy choice."

"I am glad you approve," said Dumbledore, smiling. "May I offer you a drink?"

"That would be welcome," said Voldemort. "I have come a long way."

Dumbledore stood and swept over to the cabinet where he now kept the Pensieve, but which then was full of bottles. Having handed Voldemort a

goblet of wine and poured one for himself, he returned to the seat behind his desk. . "So, Tom ... to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Voldemort did not answer at once, but merely sipped his wine.

"They do not call me 'Tom' anymore," he said. "These days, I am known as —"

"I know what you are known as," said Dumbledore, smiling, pleasantly. "But to me, I'm afraid, you will always be Tom Riddle. It is one of the irritating things about old teachers. I am afraid that they never quite forget their charges' youthful beginnings."

He raised his glass as though toasting Voldemort, whose face remained expressionless. Nevertheless, Harry felt the atmosphere in the room change subtly: Dumbledore's refusal to use Voldemort's chosen name was a refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting, and Harry could tell that Voldemort took it as such.

"I am surprised you have remained here so long," said Voldemort after a short pause. "I always wondered why a wizard such as yourself never wished to leave school."

"Well," said Dumbledore, still smiling, "to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on ancient skills, helping hone young minds. If I remember correctly, you once saw the attraction of teaching too."

"I see it still," said Voldemort. "I merely wondered why you — who are so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who have twice, I think, been offered the post of Minister —"

"Three times at the last count, actually," said Dumbledore. "But the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, something we have in common, I think."

Voldemort inclined his head, unsmiling, and took another sip of wine. Dumbledore did not break the silence that stretched between them now, but waited, with a look of pleasant expectancy, for Voldemort to talk first.

"I have returned," he said, after a little while, "later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected . . . but I have returned, nevertheless, to request again what he once told me I was too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must know that I have seen and done much since I left this place. I could show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard."

Dumbledore considered Voldemort over the top of his own goblet for a while before speaking.

"Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us," he said quietly. "Rumors of your doings have reached your old school, Tom. I should be sorry to believe half of them."

Voldemort's expression remained impassive as he said, "Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies. You must know this, Dumbledore."

"You call it 'greatness,' what you have been doing, do you?" asked Dumbledore delicately.

"Certainly," said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. "I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed —"

"Of some kinds of magic," Dumbledore corrected him quietly. "Of some. Of others, you remain . . . forgive me . . . woefully ignorant."

For the first time, Voldemort smiled. It was a taut leer, an evil thing, more threatening than a look of rage.

"The old argument," he said softly. "But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore."

"Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places," suggested Dumbledore.

"Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts?" said Voldemort. "Will you let me return? Will you let me share

my knowledge with your students? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who call themselves — or so rumor has it — the Death Eaters?"

Harry could tell that Voldemort had not expected Dumbledore to know this name; he saw Voldemort's eyes flash red again and the slitlike nostrils flare.

"My friends," he said, after a moment's pause, "will carry on without me, I am sure."

"I am glad to hear that you consider them friends," said Dumbledore. "I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants."

"You are mistaken," said Voldemort.

"Then if I were to go to the Hog's Head tonight, I would not find a group of them — Nott, Rosier, Muldber, Dolohov — awaiting your return? Devoted friends indeed, to travel this far with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post."

There could be no doubt that Dumbledore's detailed knowledge of those with whom he was traveling was even less welcome to Voldemort; however, he rallied almost at once.

"You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore."

"Oh no, merely friendly with the local barmen," said Dumbledore lightly.
"Now, Tom . . ."

Dumbledore set down his empty glass and drew himself up in his seat, the tips of his fingers together in a very characteristic gesture.

"Let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight, surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not want?"

Voldemort looked coldly surprised. "A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much."

"Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were eighteen. What is it you're after, Tom? Why not try an open request for once?"

Voldemort sneered. "If you do not want to give me a job —"

"Of course I don't," said Dumbledore. "And I don't think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here, you asked, you must have had a purpose."

Voldemort stood up. He looked less like Tom Riddle than ever, his features thick with rage. "This is your final word?"

"It is," said Dumbledore, also standing.

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other."

"No, nothing," said Dumbledore, and a great sadness filled his face. "The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom. ... I wish I could. . . ."

For a second, Harry was on the verge of shouting a pointless warning: He was sure that Voldemort's hand had twitched toward his pocket and his wand; but then the moment had passed, Voldemort had turned away, the door was closing, and he was gone.

Harry felt Dumbledore's hand close over his arm again and moments later, they were standing together on almost the same spot, but there was no snow building on the window ledge, and Dumbledore's hand was blackened and dead-looking once more.

"Why?" said Harry at once, looking up into Dumbledore's face. "Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?"

"I have ideas," said Dumbledore, "but no more than that."

"What ideas, sir?"

"I shall tell you, Harry, when you have retrieved that memory from Professor Slughorn," said Dumbledore.

"When you have that last piece of the jigsaw, everything will, I hope, be clear ... to both of us."

Harry was still burning with curiosity and even though Dumbledore had walked to the door and was holding it open for him, he did not move at once.

"Was he after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again, sir? He didn't say. ..."

"Oh, he definitely wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job," said Dumbledore. "The aftermath of our little meeting proved that. You see, we have never been able to keep a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort."

Chapter 21: The Unknowable Room

Harry wracked his brains over the next week as to how he was to persuade Slughorn to hand over the true memory, but nothing in the nature of a brain wave occurred and he was reduced to doing what he did increasingly these days when at a loss: poring over his Potions book, hoping that the Prince would have scribbled something useful in a margin, as he had done so many times before.

"You won't find anything in there," said Hermione firmly, late on Sunday evening.

"Don't start, Hermione," said Harry. "If it hadn't been for the Prince, Ron wouldn't be sitting here now."

"He would if you'd just listened to Snape in our first year," said Hermione dismissively.

Harry ignored her. He had just found an incantation "Sectum-sempra!" scrawled in a margin above the intriguing words "For enemies," and was itching to try it out, but thought it best not to in front of Hermione. Instead, he surreptitiously folded down the corner of the page. They were sitting beside the fire in the common room; the only other people awake were fellow sixth years. There had been a certain amount of excitement earlier when they had come back from dinner to find a new sign on the notice board that announced the date for their Apparition Test. Those who would be seventeen on or before the first test date, the twenty-first of April, had the

option of signing up for additional practice sessions, which would take place (heavily supervised) in Hogsmeade.

Ron had panicked on reading this notice; he had still not managed to Apparate and feared he would not be ready for the test. Hermione, who had now achieved Apparition twice, was a little more confident, but Harry, who would not be seventeen for another four months, could not take the test whether ready or not.

"At least you can Apparate, though!" said Ron tensely. "You'll have no trouble come July!"

"I've only done it once," Harry reminded him; he had finally managed to disappear and rematerialize inside his hoop during their previous lesson.

Having wasted a lot of time worrying aloud about Apparition, Ron was now struggling to finish a viciously difficult essay for Snape that Harry and Hermione had already completed. Harry fully expected to receive low marks on his, because he had disagreed with Snape on the best way to tackle dementors, but he did not care: Slughorn's memory was the most important thing to him now.

"I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" said Hermione, more loudly. "There's only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal —"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," said Harry, not looking up from the book. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Dumbledore says Veritaserum won't do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell. . . ."

"You're going about it the wrong way," said Hermione. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can't. It's not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that —"

"How do you spell 'belligerent'?" said Ron, shaking his quill very hard while staring at his parchment. "It can't be B — U — M —"

"No, it isn't," said Hermione, pulling Ron's essay toward her. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O — R — G either. What kind of quill are you using?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones, but I think the charm must be wearing off."

"Yes, it must," said Hermione, pointing at the title of his essay, "because we were asked how we'd deal with dementors, not 'Dug-bogs', and I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" said Ron, staring horror-struck at the parchment. "Don't say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," said Hermione, pulling the essay toward her and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," said Ron, sinking back in his chair, rubbing his eyes wearily. Hermione turned faintly pink, but merely said, "Don't let Lavender hear you saying that."

"I won't," said Ron into his hands. "Or maybe I will, then she'll ditch me."

"Why don't you ditch her if you want to finish it?" asked Harry.

"You haven't ever chucked anyone, have you?" said Ron. "You and Cho just —"

"Sort of fell apart, yeah," said Harry.

"Wish that would happen with me and Lavender," said Ron gloomily, watching Hermione silently tapping each of his mis-spelled words with the end of her wand, so that they corrected themselves on the page. "But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It's like going out with the giant squid."

"There," said Hermione, some twenty minutes later, handing back Ron's essay.

"Thanks a million," said Ron. "Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?" Harry, who had found nothing useful in the Half-Blood

Prince's notes so far, looked around; the three of them were now the only ones left in the common room, Seamus having just gone up to bed cursing Snape and his essay. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ron scratching out one last paragraph on dementors using Hermione's quill. Harry had just closed the Half-Blood Prince's book, yawning, when —

Crack!

Hermione let out a little shriek; Ron spilled ink all over his freshly completed essay, and Harry said, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf bowed low and addressed his own gnarled toes. "Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give--"

Crack!

Dobby appeared alongside Kreacher, his tea-cozy hat askew. "Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter!" he squeaked, casting Kreacher a resentful look. "And Kreacher ought to tell Dobby when he is coming to see Harry Potter so they can make their re-ports together!"

"What is this?" asked Hermione, still looking shocked by these sudden appearances. "What's going on, Harry?" Harry hesitated before answering, because he had not told Hermione about setting Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy; house-elves were always such a touchy subject with her.

"Well. . . they've been following Malfoy for me," he said.

"Night and day," croaked Kreacher.

"Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!" said Dobby proudly, swaying where he stood. Hermione looked indignant.

"You haven't slept, Dobby? But surely, Harry, you didn't tell him not to —"

"No, of course I didn't," said Harry quickly. "Dobby, you can sleep, all right? But has either of you found out anything?" he hastened to ask, before Hermione could intervene again.

"Master Malfoy moves with a nobility that befits his pure blood," croaked Kreacher at once. "His features recall the fine bones of my mistress and his manners are those of—"

"Draco Malfoy is a bad boy!" squeaked Dobby angrily. "A bad boy who — who —" He shuddered from the tassel of his tea cozy to the toes of his socks and then ran at the fire, as though about to dive into it. Harry, to whom this was not entirely unexpected, caught him around the middle and held him fast. For a few seconds Dobby struggled, then went limp.

"Thank you, Harry Potter," he panted. "Dobby still finds it difficult to speak ill of his old masters." Harry released him; Dobby straightened his tea

cozy and said defiantly to Kreacher, "But Kreacher should know that Draco Malfoy is not a good master to a house-elf!"

"Yeah, we don't need to hear about you being in love with Malfoy," Harry told Kreacher. "Let's fast forward to where he's actually been going."

Kreacher bowed again, looking furious, and then said, "Master Malfoy eats in the Great Hall, he sleeps in a dormitory in the dungeons, he attends his classes in a variety of—"

"Dobby, you tell me," said Harry, cutting across Kreacher. "Has he been going anywhere he shouldn't have?"

"Harry Potter, sir," squeaked Dobby, his great orblike eyes shining in the firelight, "the Malfoy boy is breaking no rules that Dobby can discover, but he is still keen to avoid detection. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him while he enters —"

"The Room of Requirement!" said Harry, smacking himself hard on the forehead with Advanced Potion-Making. Hermione and Ron stared at him. "That's where he's been sneaking off to! That's where he's doing... whatever he's doing! And I bet that's why he's been disappearing off the map — come to think of it, I've never seen the Room of Requirement on there!"

"Maybe the Marauders never knew the room was there," said Ron.

"I think it'll be part of the magic of the room," said Hermione. "If you need it to be unplottable, it will be."

"Dobby, have you managed to get in to have a look at what Malfoy's doing?" said Harry eagerly.

"No, Harry Potter, that is impossible," said Dobby.

"No, it's not," said Harry at once. "Malfoy got into our head-quarters there last year, so I'll be able to get in and spy on him, no problem."

"But I don't think you will, Harry," said Hermione slowly. "Malfoy already knew exactly how we were using the room, didn't he, because that stupid Marietta had blabbed. He needed the room to become the headquarters of the D.A., so it did. But you don't know what the room becomes when Malfoy goes in there, so you don't know what to ask it to transform into."

"There'll be a way around that," said Harry dismissively. "You've done brilliantly, Dobby."

"Kreachers done well too," said Hermione kindly; but far from looking grateful, Kreacher averted his huge, bloodshot eyes and croaked at the ceiling, "The Mudblood is speaking to Kreacher, Kreacher will pretend he cannot hear —"

"Get out of it," Harry snapped at him, and Kreacher made one last deep bow and Disapparated. "You'd better go and get some sleep too, Dobby."

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked Dobby happily, and he too vanished.

"How good is this?" said Harry enthusiastically, turning to Ron and Hermione the moment the room was elf-free again. "We know where Malfoy's going! We've got him cornered now!"

"Yeah, it's great," said Ron glumly, who was attempting to mop up the sodden mass of ink that had recently been an almost completed essay. Hermione pulled it toward her and began siphoning the ink off with her wand.

"But what's all this about him going up there with a variety of students?" said Hermione. "How many people are in on it? You wouldn't think he'd trust lots of them to know what he's doing---"

"Yeah, that is weird," said Harry, frowning. "I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn't Crabbe's business what he was doing... so what's he telling all these... all these..." Harry's voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire. "God, I've been stupid," he said quietly. "It's obvious, isn't it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon. . . . He could've nicked some any time during that lesson. . . ."

"Nick'd what?" said Ron.

"Polyjuice Potion. He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slug-horn showed us in our first Potions lesson... There aren't a whole variety of students standing guard for Malfoy... it's just Crabbe and Goyle as usual. ...Yeah, it all fits!" said Harry, jumping up and starting to pace in front of the fire. "They're stupid enough to do what they're told even if he won't tell them what he's up to, but he doesn't want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement, so he's got them taking Polyjuice to make them look like other people... Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch — ha! Crabbe and Goyle!"

"Do you mean to say," said Hermione in a hushed voice, "that that little girl whose scales I repaired — ?"

"Yeah, of course!" said Harry loudly, staring at her. "Of course! Malfoy must've been inside the room at the time, so she — what am I talking about? — he dropped the scales to tell Malfoy not to come out, because there was someone there! And there was that girl who dropped the toadspawn too! We've been walking past him all the time and not realizing it!"

"He's got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls?" guffawed Ron. "Blimey... no wonder they don't look too happy these days. I'm surprised they don't tell him to stuff it."

"Well, they wouldn't, would they, if he's shown them his Dark Mark?" said Harry.

"Hmmm... the Dark Mark we don't know exists," said Hermione skeptically, rolling up Ron's dried essay before it could come to any more harm and handing it to him.

"We'll see" said Harry confidently.

"Yes, we will," Hermione said, getting to her feet and stretching. "But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don't think you'll be able to get into the Room of Requirement without knowing what's there first'. And I don't think you should forget" — she heaved her bag onto her shoulder and gave him a very serious look — "that what you're supposed to be concentrating on is getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night."

Harry watched her go, feeling slightly disgruntled. Once the door to the girls' dormitories had closed behind her he rounded on Ron. "What d'you think?"

"Wish I could Disapparate like a house-elf," said Ron, staring at the spot where Dobby had vanished. "I'd have that Apparition Test in the bag."

Harry did not sleep well that night. He lay awake for what felt like hours, wondering how Malfoy was using the Room of Requirement and what he, Harry, would see when he went in there the following day, for whatever Hermione said, Harry was sure that if Malfoy had—- been able to see the headquarters of the D.A., he would be able to see Malfoy's, what could it be? A meeting place? A hideout? A ston room? A workshop? Harry's mind worked feverishly and his dreams, when he finally fell asleep, were broken

and disturbed by images of Malfoy, who turned into Slughorn, who turned into Snape...

Harry was in a state of great anticipation over breakfast the following morning; he had a free period before Defense Against the Dark Arts and was determined to spend it trying to get into the Room of Requirement. Hermione was rather ostentatiously showing no interest in his whispered plans for forcing entry into the room, which irritated Harry, because he thought she might be a lot of help if she wanted to.

"Look," he said quietly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the Daily Prophet, which she had just removed from a post owl, to stop her from opening it and vanishing behind it. "I haven't forgotten about Slughorn, but I haven't got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wave why shouldn't I find out what Malfoy's doing?"

"I've already told you, you need to persuade Slughorn," said Hermione. "It's not a question of tricking him or bewitching him, or Dumbledore could have done it in a second. Instead of messing around outside the Room of Requirement" — she jerked the Prophet out from under Harry's hand and unfolded it to look at the front page — "you should go and find Slughorn and start appealing to his better nature."

"Anyone we know — ?" asked Ron, as Hermione scanned the headlines.

"Yes!" said Hermione, causing both Harry and Ron to gag on their breakfast. "But it's all right, he's not dead — it's Mundungus, he's been

arrested and sent to Azkaban! Something to do with impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary, and someone called Octavius Pepper has vanished. Oh, and how horrible, a nine-year-old boy has been arrested for trying to kill his grandparents, they think he was under the Imperius Curse."

They finished their breakfast in silence. Hermione set off immediately for Ancient Runes; Ron for the common room, where he still had to finish his conclusion on Snape's dementor essay, and Harry for the corridor on the seventh floor and the stretch of wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls to do ballet.

Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak once he had found an empty passage, but he need not have bothered. When he reached his destination he found it deserted. Harry was not sure whether his chances of getting inside the room were better with Malfoy in-side it or out, but at least his first attempt was not going to be complicated by the presence of Crabbe or Goyle pretending to be an eleven-year-old girl.

He closed his eyes as he approached the place where the Room of Requirement's door was concealed. He knew what he had to do; he had become most accomplished at it last year. Concentrating with all his might he thought, "I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here... I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here... I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here..."

Three times he walked past the door; then, his heart pounding with excitement, he opened his eyes and faced it — but he was still looking at a

stretch of mundanely blank wall. He moved forward and gave it an experimental push. The stone remained solid and unyielding.

"Okay," said Harry aloud. "Okay... I thought the wrong thing..." He pondered for a moment then set off again, eyes closed, concentrating as hard as he could. "I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly... I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly..." After three walks past, he opened his eyes expectantly.

There was no door.

"Oh, come off it," he told the wall irritably. "That was a clear instruction. Fine." He thought hard for several minutes before striding off once more. "I need you to become the place you become for Draco Malfoy..."

He did not immediately open his eyes when he had finished his patrolling; he was listening hard, as though he might hear the door pop into existence. He heard nothing, however, except the distant twittering of birds outside. He opened his eyes.

There was still no door.

Harry swore. Someone screamed. He looked around to see a gaggle of first years running back around the corner, apparently under the impression that they had just encountered a particularly foulmouthed ghost.

Harry tried every variation of "I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you" that he could think of for a whole hour, at the end of which he was forced to concede that Hermione might have had a point: The room simply did not want to open for him. Frustrated and annoyed, he set off for Defense Against the Dark Arts, pulling off his Invisibility Cloak and stuffing it into his bag as he went.

"Late again, Potter," said Snape coldly, as Harry hurried into the candlelit classroom. "Ten points from Gryffindor." Harry scowled at Snape as he flung himself into the seat beside Ron. Half the class were still on their feet, taking out books and organizing their things; he could not be much later than any of them.

"Before we start, I want your dementor essays," said Snape, waving his wand carelessly, so that twenty-five scrolls of parchment soared into the air and landed in a neat pile on his desk. "And I hope for your sakes they are better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the Imperius Curse. Now, if you will all open your books to page — what is it, Mr. Finnigan?"

"Sir," said Seamus, "I've been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius —"

"No, there wasn't," said Snape in a bored voice.

"But sir, I heard people talking —"

"If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher."

"I thought Snape and Mundungus were on the same side," muttered Harry to Ron and Hermione. "Shouldn't he be upset Mundungus has been arrested —"

"But Potter seems to have a lot to say on the subject," said Snape, pointing suddenly at the back of the room, his black eyes fixed on Harry. "Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost."

The whole class looked around at Harry, who hastily tried to recall what Dumbledore had told him the night that they had gone to visit Slughorn. "Er — well — ghosts are transparent —" he said.

"Oh, very good," interrupted Snape, his lip curling. "Yes, it is easy to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. 'Ghosts are transparent.'"

Pansy Parkinson let out a high-pitched giggle. Several other people were smirking. Harry took a deep breath and continued calmly, though his insides were boiling, "Yeah, ghosts are transparent, but Inferi are dead bodies, aren't they? So they'd be solid —"

"A five-year-old could have told us as much," sneered Snape. "The Inferius is a corpse that has been reanimated by a Dark wizard's spells. It is

not alive, it is merely used like a puppet to do the wizard's bidding. A ghost, as I trust that you are all aware by now, is the imprint of a departed soul left upon the earth, and of course, as Potter so wisely tells us, transparent. "

"Well, what Harry said is the most useful if we're trying to tell them apart!" said Ron. "When we come face-to-face with one down a dark alley, we're going to be having a look to see if its solid, aren't we, we're not going to be asking, 'Excuse me, are you the imprint of a departed soul?'" There was a ripple of laughter, instantly quelled by the look Snape gave the class.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor," said Snape. "I would expect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley, the boy so solid he cannot Apparate half an inch across a room."

"No!" whispered Hermione, grabbing Harry's arm as he opened his mouth furiously. "There's no point, you'll just end up in detention again, leave it!"

"Now open your books to page two hundred and thirteen," said Snape, smirking a little, "and read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatus Curse."

Ron was very subdued all through the class. When the bell sounded at the end of the lesson, Lavender caught up with Ron and Harry (Hermione mysteriously melted out of sight as she approached) and abused Snape hotly for his jibe about Ron's Apparition, but this seemed to merely irritate Ron, and he shook her off by making a detour into the boys' bathroom with Harry.

"Snape's right, though, isn't he?" said Ron, after staring into a cracked mirror for a minute or two. "I dunno whether it's worth me taking the test. I just can't get the hang of Apparition."

"You might as well do the extra practice sessions in Hogsmeade and see where they get you," said Harry reasonably. "It'll be more interesting than trying to get into a stupid hoop anyway. Then, if you're still not — you know — as good as you'd like to be, you can postpone the test, do it with me over the summer — Myrtle, this is the boys' bathroom!"

The ghost of a girl had risen out of the toilet in a cubicle behind them and was now floating in midair, staring at them through thick, white, round glasses. "Oh," she said glumly. "It's you two."

"Who were you expecting?" said Ron, looking at her in the mirror.

"Nobody," said Myrtle, picking moodily at a spot on her chin. "He said he'd come back and see me, but then you said you'd pop in and visit me too" — she gave Harry a reproachful look — "and I haven't seen you for months and months. I've learned not to expect too much from boys."

"I thought you lived in that girls' bathroom?" said Harry, who had been careful to give the place a wide berth for some years now.

"I do," she said, with a sulky little shrug, "but that doesn't mean I can't visit other places. I came and saw you in your bath once, remember?"

"Vividly," said Harry.

"But I thought he liked me," she said plaintively. "Maybe if you two left, he'd come back again. We had lots in common. I'm sure he felt it."

And she looked hopefully toward the door. "When you say you had lots in common," said Ron, sounding rather amused now, "d'you mean he lives in an S-bend too?"

"No," said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. "I mean he's sensitive, people bully him too, and he feels lonely and hasn't got anybody to talk to, and he's not afraid to show his feelings and cry!"

"There's been a boy in here crying?" said Harry curiously. "A young boy?"

"Never you mind!" said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, and I'll take his secret to the —"

"— not the grave, surely?" said Ron with a snort. "The sewers, maybe." Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dived back into the toilet, causing water to slop over the sides and onto the floor. Goading Myrtle seemed to have put fresh heart into Ron. "You're right," he said, swinging his schoolbag back over his shoulder, "I'll do the practice sessions in Hogsmeade before I decide about taking the test."

And so the following weekend, Ron joined Hermione and the rest of the sixth years who would turn seventeen in time to take the test in a fortnight. Harry felt rather jealous watching them all get ready to go into the village; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the first clear skies they had seen in a long time. However, he had decided to use the time to attempt another assault on the Room of Requirement.

"You'd do better," said Hermione, when he confided this plan to Ron and her in the entrance hall, "to go straight to Slughorn's of-fice and try and get that memory from him."

"I've been trying!" said Harry crossly, which was perfectly true. He had lagged behind after every Potions lesson that week in an at-tempt to corner Slughorn, but the Potions master always left the dungeon so fast that Harry had not been able to catch him. Twice, Harry had gone to his office and knocked, but received no reply, though on the second occasion he was sure he had heard the quickly stifled sounds of an old gramophone.

"He doesn't want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I've been trying to get him on his own again, and he's not going to let it happen!"

"Well, you've just got to keep at it, haven't you?"

The short queue of people waiting to file past Filch, who was do-ing his usual prodding act with the Secrecy Sensor, moved forward a few steps and Harry did not answer in case he was overheard by the caretaker. He wished

Ron and Hermione both luck, then turned and climbed the marble staircase again, determined, whatever Hermione said, to devote an hour or two to the Room of Requirement.

Once out of sight of the entrance hall, Harry pulled the Marauder's Map and his Invisibility Cloak from his bag. Having concealed himself, he tapped the map, murmured, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," and scanned it carefully.

As it was Sunday morning, nearly all the students were inside their various common rooms, the Gryffindors in one tower, the Ravenclaws in another, the Slytherins in the dungeons, and the Hufflepuffs in the basement near the kitchens. Here and there a stray person meandered around the library or up a corridor. There were a few people out in the grounds, and there, alone in the seventh-floor corridor, was Gregory Goyle. There was no sign of the Room of Requirement, but Harry was not worried about that; if Goyle was standing guard outside it, the room was open, whether the map was aware of it or not. He therefore sprinted up the stairs, slowing down only when he reached the corner into the corridor, when he began to creep, very slowly, toward the very same little girl, clutching her heavy brass scales, that Hermione had so kindly helped a fortnight before. He waited until he was right behind her before bending very low and whispering, "Hello...you're very pretty, aren't you?"

Goyle gave a high-pitched scream of terror, threw the scales up into the air, and sprinted away, vanishing from sight long before the sound of the scales smashing had stopped echoing around the corridor. Laughing, Harry

turned to contemplate the blank wall behind which, he was sure, Draco Malfoy was now standing frozen, aware that someone unwelcome was out there, but not daring to make an appearance. It gave Harry a most agreeable feeling of power as he tried to remember what form of words he had not yet tried.

Yet this hopeful mood did not last long. Half an hour later, having tried many more variations of his request to see what Malfoy was up to, the wall was just as doorless as ever. Harry felt frustrated beyond belief—Malfoy might be just feet away from him, and there was still not the tiniest shred of evidence as to what he was doing in there. Losing his patience completely, Harry ran at the wall and kicked it.

"OUCH!"

He thought he might have broken his toe; as he clutched it and hopped on one foot, the Invisibility Cloak slipped off him.

"Harry?"

He spun around, one-legged, and toppled over. There, to his utter astonishment, was Tonks, walking toward him as though she frequently strolled up this corridor.

"What're you doing here?" he said, scrambling to his feet again; why did she always have to find him lying on the floor?

"I came to see Dumbledore," said Tonks. Harry thought she looked terrible: thinner than usual, her mouse-colored hair lank.

"His office isn't here," said Harry, "it's round the other side of the castle, behind the gargoyle —"

"I know," said Tonks. "He's not there. Apparently he's gone away again."

"Has he?" said Harry, putting his bruised foot gingerly back on the floor. "Hey — you don't know where he goes, I suppose?"

"No," said Tonks.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"Nothing in particular," said Tonks, picking, apparently unconsciously, at the sleeve of her robe. "I just thought he might know what's going on. I've heard rumors... people getting hurt."

"Yeah, I know, it's all been in the papers," said Harry. "That little kid trying to kill his —"

"The Prophet's often behind the times," said Tonks, who didn't seem to be listening to him. "You haven't had any letters from any-one in the Order recently?"

"No one from the Order writes to me anymore," said Harry, "not since Sirius —“ He saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," he muttered awkwardly. "I mean... I miss him, as well."

"What?" said Tonks blankly, as though she had not heard him. "Well. I'll see you around, Harry.”

And she turned abruptly and walked back down the corridor, leaving Harry to stare after her. After a minute or so, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak on again and resumed his efforts to get into the Room of Requirement, but his heart was not in it. Finally, a hollow feeling in his stomach and the knowledge that Ron and Hermione would soon be back for lunch made him abandon the attempt and leave the corridor to Malfoy who, hopefully, would be too afraid to leave for some hours to come.

He found Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall, already halfway through an early lunch.

"I did it — well, kind of!" Ron told Harry enthusiastically when he caught sight of him. "I was supposed to be Apparating to out-side Madam Puddifoots Tea Shop and I overshot it a bit, ended up near Scrivenshafts, but at least I moved!"

"Good one," said Harry. "How'd you do, Hermione?"

"Oh, she was perfect, obviously," said Ron, before Hermione could answer. "Perfect deliberation, divination, and desperation or whatever the hell it is — we all went for a quick drink in the Three Broomsticks after and you should've heard Twycross going on about her — I'll be surprised if he doesn't pop the question soon —"

"And what about you?" asked Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Have you been up at the Room of Requirement all this time?"

"Yep," said Harry. "And guess who I ran into up there? Tonks!"

"Tonks?" repeated Ron and Hermione together, looking surprised.

"Yeah, she said she'd come to visit Dumbledore."

"If you ask me," said Ron once Harry had finished describing his conversation with Tonks, "she's cracking up a bit. Losing her nerve after what happened at the Ministry."

"It's a bit odd," said Hermione, who for some reason looked very concerned. "She's supposed to be guarding the school, why she suddenly abandoning her post to come and see Dumbledore when he's not even here?"

"I had a thought," said Harry tentatively. He felt strange about voicing it; this was much more Hermione's territory than his. "You don't think she can have been... you know... in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him. "What on earth makes you say that?"

"I dunno," said Harry, shrugging, "but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name, and her Patronus is a big four-legged thing now. I wondered whether it hadn't become... you know... him."

"It's a thought," said Hermione slowly. "But I still don't know why she'd be bursting into the castle to see Dumbledore, if that's re-ally why she was here."

"Goes back to what I said, doesn't it?" said Ron, who was now shoveling mashed potato into his mouth. "She's gone a bit funny. Lost her nerve. Women," he said wisely to Harry, "they're easily upset."

"And yet," said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, "I doubt you'd find a woman who sulked for half an hour because Madam Rosmerta didn't laugh at their joke about the hag, the Healer, and the *Mimulus mimbletonia*."

Ron scowled.

Chapter 22: After the Burial

Patches of bright blue sky were beginning to appear over the castle turrets, but these signs of approaching summer did not lift Harry's mood. He had been thwarted, both in his attempts to find out what Malfoy was doing, and in his efforts to start a conversation with Slughorn that might lead, somehow, to Slughorn handing over the memory he had apparently suppressed for decades.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting with Ron in a sunny corner of the courtyard after lunch. Hermione and Ron were both clutching a Ministry of Magic leaflet — Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them — for they were taking their tests that very afternoon, but by and large the leaflets had not proved soothing to the nerves.

Ron gave a start and tried to hide behind Hermione as a girl came around the corner.

"It isn't Lavender," said Hermione wearily.

"Oh, good," said Ron, relaxing.

"Harry Potter?" said the girl. "I was asked to give you this."

"Thanks..."

Harry's heart sank as he took the small scroll of parchment. Once the girl was out of earshot he said, "Dumbledore said we wouldn't be having any more lessons until I got the memory!"

"Maybe he wants to check on how you're doing?" suggested Hermione, as Harry unrolled the parchment; but rather than finding Dumbledore's long, narrow, slanted writing he saw an untidy sprawl, very difficult to read due to the presence of large blotches on the parchment where the ink had run.

Dear Harry, Ron and Hermione!

Aragog died last night. Harry and Ron, you met him and you know how special he was.

Hermione, I know you'd have liked him.

It would mean a lot to me if you'd nip down for the burial later this evening.

I'm planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day.

I know you're not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak.

Wouldn't ask, but I can't face it alone.

Hagrid

"Look at this," said Harry, handing the note to Hermione. "Oh, for heaven's sake," she said, scanning it quickly and passing it to Ron, who read it through looking increasingly incredulous. "He's mental" he said furiously. "That thing told its mates to eat Harry and me! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid expects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!"

"It's not just that," said Hermione. "He's asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security's a million times tighter and how much trouble we'd be in if we were caught."

"We've been down to see him by night before," said Harry.

"Yes, but for something like this?" said Hermione. "We've risked a lot to help Hagrid out, but after all — Aragog's dead. If it were a question of saving him —"

"— I'd want to go even less," said Ron firmly. "You didn't meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have improved him a lot."

Harry took the note back and stared down at all the inky blotches all over it. Tears had clearly fallen thick and fast upon the parchment. . . .

"Harry, you can't be thinking of going," said Hermione. "It's such a pointless thing to get detention for."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know," he said. "I s'pose Hagrid'll have to bury Aragog without us."

"Yes, he will," said Hermione, looking relieved. "Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doing our tests. . . . Try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!"

"Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?" said Harry bitterly.

"Lucky," said Ron suddenly. "Harry, that's it — get lucky!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Use your lucky potion!"

"Ron, that's — that's it!" said Hermione, sounding stunned. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it?"

Harry stared at them both. "Felix Felicis?" he said. "I dunno . . . I was sort of saving it. ..."

"What for?" demanded Ron incredulously.

"What on earth is more important than this memory, Harry?" asked Hermione.

Harry did not answer. The thought of that little golden bottle had hovered on the edges of his imagination for some time; vague and unformulated plans that involved Ginny splitting up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths of his brain, unacknowledged except during dreams or the twilight time between sleeping and waking. . . .

"Harry? Are you still with us?" asked Hermione.

"Wha — ? Yeah, of course," he said, pulling himself together. "Well. . . okay. If I can't get Slughorn to talk this afternoon, I'll take some Felix and have another go this evening."

"That's decided, then," said Hermione briskly, getting to her feet and performing a graceful pirouette. "Destination . . . determina-tion . . . deliberation . . ." she murmured.

"Oh, stop that," Ron begged her, "I feel sick enough as it is — quick, hide me!"

"It isn't Lavender!" said Hermione impatiently, as another couple of girls appeared in the courtyard and Ron dived behind her.

"Cool," said Ron, peering over Hermiones shoulder to check. "Blimey, they don't look happy, do they?"

"They're the Montgomery sisters and of course they don't look happy, didn't you hear what happened to their little brother?" said Hermione.

"I'm losing track of what's happening to everyone's relatives, to be honest," said Ron.

"Well, their brother was attacked by a werewolf. The rumor is that their mother refused to help the Death Eaters. Anyway, the boy was only five and he died in St. Mungos, they couldn't save him."

"He died?" repeated Harry, shocked. "But surely werewolves don't kill, they just turn you into one of them?"

"They sometimes kill," said Ron, who looked unusually grave now. "I've heard of it happening when the werewolf gets carried away."

"What was the werewolf's name?" said Harry quickly.

"Well, the rumor is that it was that Fenrir Greyback," said Hermione.

"I knew it — the maniac who likes attacking kids, the one Lupin told me about!" said Harry angrily.

Hermione looked at him bleakly.

"Harry, you've got to get that memory," she said. "It's all about stopping Voldemort, isn't it? These dreadful things that are hap-pening are all down to him. . . ."

The bell rang overhead in the castle and both Hermione and Ron jumped to their feet, looking terrified.

"You'll do fine," Harry told them both, as they headed toward the entrance hall to meet the rest of the people taking their Ap-partition Test. "Good luck."

"And you too!" said Hermione with a significant look, as Harry headed off to the dungeons.

There were only three of them in Potions that afternoon: Harry, Ernie, and Draco Malfoy.

"All too young to Apparate just yet?" said Slughorn genially, "Not turned seventeen yet?"

They shook their heads.

"Ah well," said Slughorn cheerily, "as we're so few, we'll do something for fun. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!"

"That sounds good, sir," said Ernie sycophantically, rubbing his hands together. Malfoy, on the other hand, did not crack a smile. "What do you mean, 'something amusing'?" he said irritably. "Oh, surprise me," said Slughorn airily.

Malfoy opened his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* with a sulky expression. It could not have been plainer that he thought this lesson was a waste of time. Undoubtedly, Harry thought, watching him over the top of his own book, Malfoy was begrudging the time he could otherwise be spending in the Room of Requirement.

Was it his imagination, or did Malfoy, like Tonks, look thinner! Certainly he looked paler; his skin still had that grayish tinge, probably because he so rarely saw daylight these days. But there was no air of smugness, excitement, or superiority; none of the swagger that he had had on the

Hogwarts Express, when he had boasted openly of the mission he had been given by Voldemort. . . . There could be only one conclusion, in Harry's opinion: The mission, whatever it was, was going badly.

Cheered by this thought, Harry skimmed through his copy of Advanced Potion-Making and found a heavily corrected Half-Blood Prince's version of "An Elixir to Induce Euphoria," which seemed not only to meet Slughorn's instructions, but which might (Harry's heart leapt as the thought struck him) put Slughorn into such a good mood that he would be prepared to hand over that memory if Harry could persuade him to taste some. . . .

"Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful," said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stared down into the sunshine yellow contents of Harry's cauldron. "Euphoria, I take it? And what's that I smell? Mmmm . . . you've added just a sprig of peppermint, haven't you? Unorthodox, but what a stroke of inspiration, Harry, of course, that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking. ... I really don't know where you get these brain waves, my boy . . . unless —"

Harry pushed the Half-Blood Prince's book deeper into his bag with his foot.

"— it's just your mother's genes coming out in you!"

"Oh . . . yeah, maybe," said Harry, relieved.

Ernie was looking rather grumpy; determined to outshine Harry for once, he had most rashly invented his own potion, which had curdled and formed a kind of purple dumpling at the bottom of his cauldron. Malfoy was already packing up, sour-faced; Slughorn had pronounced his Hiccuping Solution merely "passable."

The bell rang and both Ernie and Malfoy left at once. "Sir," Harry began, but Slughorn immediately glanced over his shoulder; when he saw that the room was empty but for himself and Harry, he hurried away as fast as he could.

"Professor — Professor, don't you want to taste my po — ?" called Harry desperately.

But Slughorn had gone. Disappointed, Harry emptied the cauldron, packed up his things, left the dungeon, and walked slowly back upstairs to the common room.

Ron and Hermione returned in the late afternoon.

"Harry!" cried Hermione as she climbed through the portrait hole. "Harry, I passed!"

"Well done!" he said. "And Ron?"

"He — he just failed," whispered Hermione, as Ron came slouching into the room looking most morose. "It was really unlucky, a tiny thing, the

examiner just spotted that he'd left half an eyebrow behind. . . How did it go with Slughorn?"

"No joy," said Harry, as Ron joined them. "Bad luck, mate, but you'll pass next time — we can take it together."

"Yeah, I s'pose," said Ron grumpily. "But half an eyebrow — like that matters!"

"I know," said Hermione soothingly, "it does seem really harsh. ..."

They spent most of their dinner roundly abusing the Apparition examiner, and Ron looked fractionally more cheerful by the time they set off back to the common room, now discussing the continuing problem of Slughorn and the memory.

"So, Harry — you going to use the Felix Felicis or what?" Ron demanded.

"Yeah, I s'pose I'd better," said Harry. "I don't reckon I'll need all of it, not twenty-four hours' worth, it can't take all night.... I'll just take a mouthful. Two or three hours should do it."

"It's a great feeling when you take it," said Ron reminiscently. "Like you can't do anything wrong."

"What are you talking about?" said Hermione, laughing. "You've never taken any!"

"Yeah, but I thought I had, didn't I?" said Ron, as though explaining the obvious. "Same difference really ..."

As they had only just seen Slughorn enter the Great Hall and knew that he liked to take time over meals, they lingered for a while in the common room, the plan being that Harry should go to Slughorn's office once the teacher had had time to get back there. When the sun had sunk to the level of the treetops in the Forbidden Forest, they decided the moment had come, and after checking carefully that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all in the common room, sneaked up to the boys' dormitory.

Harry took out the rolled-up socks at the bottom of his trunk and extracted the tiny, gleaming bottle.

"Well, here goes," said Harry, and he raised the little bottle and took a carefully measured gulp.

"What does it feel like?" whispered Hermione.

Harry did not answer for a moment. Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him; he felt as though he could have done anything, anything at all... and getting the memory from Slughorn seemed suddenly not only possible, but positively easy. . . .

He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.

"Excellent," he said. "Really excellent. Right. . . I'm going down to Hagrid's."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together, looking aghast.

"No, Harry — you've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry confidently. "I'm going to Hagrid's, I've got a good feeling about going to Hagrid's."

"You've got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?" asked Ron, looking stunned.

"Yeah," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. "I feel like it's the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?"

"No," said Ron and Hermione together, both looking positively alarmed now.

"This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?" said Hermione anxiously, holding up the bottle to the light. "You haven't got another little bottle full of— I don't know —"

"Essence of Insanity?" suggested Ron, as Harry swung his cloak over his shoulders.

Harry laughed, and Ron and Hermione looked even more alarmed.

"Trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing ... or at least" he strolled confidently to the door— "Felix does."

He pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and set off down the stairs, Ron and Hermione hurrying along behind him. At the foot of the stairs, Harry slid through the open door.

"What were you doing up there with her!" shrieked Lavender Brown, staring right through Harry at Ron and Hermione emerging together from the boys' dormitories. Harry heard Ron splutter-ing behind him as he darted across the room away from them.

Getting through the portrait hole was simple; as he approached it, Ginny and Dean came through it, and Harry was able to slip between them. As he did so, he brushed accidentally against Ginny.

"Don't push me, please, Dean," she said, sounding annoyed. ; "You're always doing that, I can get through perfectly well on my own. ..."

The portrait swung closed behind Harry, but not before he had heard Dean make an angry retort.. . . His feeling of elation in-creasing, Harry strode off through the castle. He did not have to creep along, for he met nobody on his way, but this did not surprise him in the slightest. This evening, he was the luckiest person at Hogwarts.

Why he knew that going to Hagrid's was the right thing to do, he had no idea. It was as though the potion was illuminating a few steps of the path at a time. He could not see the final destination, he could not see where Slughorn came in, but he knew that he was going the right way to get that memory. When he reached the entrance hall he saw that Filch had forgotten to lock the front door. Beaming, Harry threw it open and breathed in the smell of clean air and grass for a moment before walking down the steps into the dusk.

It was when he reached the bottom step that it occurred to him how very pleasant it would be to pass the vegetable patch on his walk to Hagrid's. It was not strictly on the way, but it seemed clear to Harry that this was a whim on which he should act, so he directed his feet immediately toward the vegetable patch, where he was pleased, but not altogether surprised, to find Professor Slughorn in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry lurked behind a low stone wall, feeling at peace with the world and listening to their conversation.

"I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona," Slughorn was saying courteously, "most authorities agree that they are at their most efficacious if picked at twilight."

"Oh, I quite agree," said Professor Sprout warmly. "That enough for you?"

"Plenty, plenty," said Slughorn, who, Harry saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. "This should allow for a few leaves for each of my third

years, and some to spare if anybody over-stews them. . . . Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!"

Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed his steps to the spot where Harry stood, invisible.

Seized with an immediate desire to reveal himself, Harry pulled I off the cloak with a flourish.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Merlin's beard, Harry, you made me jump," said Slughorn, stopping dead in his tracks and looking wary. "How did you get out of the castle?"

"I think Filch must've forgotten to lock the doors," said Harry cheerfully, and was delighted to see Slughorn scowl.

"I'll be reporting that man, he's more concerned about litter than proper security if you ask me. . . . But why are you out then, Harry?"

"Well, sir, it's Hagrid," said Harry, who knew that the right thing to do just now was to tell the truth. "He's pretty upset. . . . But you won't tell anyone, Professor? I don't want trouble for him. ..."

Slughorn's curiosity was evidently aroused. "Well, I can't promise that," he said gruffly. "But I know that Dumbledore trusts Hagrid to the hilt, so I'm sure he can't be up to anything very dreadful. . ."

"Well, it's this giant spider, he's had it for years. ... It lived in the forest. ... It could talk and everything —"

"I heard rumors there were acromantulas in the forest," said Slughorn softly, looking over at the mass of black trees. "It's true, then?"

"Yes," said Harry. "But this one, Aragog, the first one Hagrid ever got, it died last night. He's devastated. He wants company while he buries it and I said I'd go."

"Touching, touching," said Slughorn absentmindedly, his large droopy eyes fixed upon the distant lights of Hagrid's cabin. "But acromantula venom is very valuable ... If the beast only just died it might not yet have dried out. . . . Of course, I wouldn't want to do anything insensitive if Hagrid is upset. . . . but if there was any way to procure some ... I mean, its almost impossible to get venom from an acromantula while its alive. ..."

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Harry now. ". . . seems an awful waste not to collect it... might get a hundred Galleons a pint. ... To be frank, my salary is not large. . . ."

And now Harry saw clearly what was to be done. "Well," he said, with a most convincing hesitancy, "well, if you wanted to come, Professor, Hagrid

would probably be really pleased. . . . Give Aragog a better send-off, you know ..."

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn, his eyes now gleaming with enthusiasm. "I tell you what, Harry, I'll meet you down there with a bottle or two. . . . We'll drink the poor beast's — well — not health — but we'll send it off in style, anyway, once it's buried. And I'll change my tie, this one is a little exuberant for the occasion. . . ."

He bustled back into the castle, and Harry sped off to Hagrid's, delighted with himself.

"Yen came," croaked Hagrid, when he opened the door and saw Harry emerging from the Invisibility Cloak in front of him.

"Yeah — Ron and Hermione couldn't, though," said Harry. "They're really sorry."

"Don — don matter . . . Hed've bin touched yeh're here, though, Harry. . . ."

Hagrid gave a great sob. He had made himself a black armband out of what looked like a rag dipped in boot polish, and his eyes were puffy, red, and swollen. Harry patted him consolingly on the elbow, which was the highest point of Hagrid he could easily reach.

"Where are we burying him?" he asked. "The forest?"

"Blimey, no," said Hagrid, wiping his streaming eyes on the bottom of his shirt. "The other spiders won't let me anywhere near their webs now Aragog's gone. Turns out it was only on his orders they didn't eat me! Can yeh believe that, Harry?"

The honest answer was "yes"; Harry recalled with painful ease the scene when he and Ron had come face-to-face with the aero-mantulas. They had been quite clear that Aragog was the only thing that stopped them from eating Hagrid.

"Never bin an area o' the forest I couldn't go before!" said Hagrid, shaking his head. "It wasn't easy, gettin' Aragog's body out o' there, I can tell yeh — they usually eat their dead, see. . . . But I wanted ter give 'im a nice burial... a proper send-off. . ."

He broke into sobs again and Harry resumed the patting of his elbow, saying as he did so (for the potion seemed to indicate that it was the right thing to do), "Professor Slughorn met me coming down here, Hagrid."

"Not in trouble, are yeh?" said Hagrid, looking up, alarmed. "Yeh shouldn't be outta the castle in the evenin', I know it, it's my fault —"

"No, no, when he heard what I was doing he said he'd like to come and pay his last respects to Aragog too," said Harry.

"He's gone to change into something more suitable, I think...and he said he'd bring some bottles so we can drink to Aragog's mem-ory..."

"Did he?" said Hagrid, looking both astonished and touched. "Tha's — tha's righ' nice of him, that is, an' not turnin' yeh in ei-ther. I've never really had a lot ter do with Horace Slughorn before. . . . Comin' ter see old Aragog off, though, eh? Well. . . he'd've liked that, Aragog would. . . ."

Harry thought privately that what Aragog would have liked most about Slughorn was the ample amount of edible flesh he pro-vided, but he merely moved to the rear window of Hagrid's hut, where he saw the rather horrible sight of the enormous dead spider lying on its back outside, its legs curled and tangled.

"Are we going to bury him here, Hagrid, in your garden?"

"Jus' beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought," said Hagrid in a choked voice. "I've already dug the — yeh know — grave. Jus' thought we'd say a few nice things over him — happy memories, yeh know —"

His voice quivered and broke. There was a knock on the door, and he turned to answer it, blowing his nose on his great spotted handkerchief as he did so. Slughorn hurried over the threshold, several bottles in his arms, and wearing a somber black cravat.

"Hagrid," he said, in a deep, grave voice. "So very sorry to hear of your loss."

"Tha's very nice of yeh," said Hagrid. "Thanks a lot. An' thanks fer not givin Harry detention neither. . . ."

"Wouldn't have dreamed of it," said Slughorn. "Sad night, sad night. . . Where is the poor creature?"

"Out here," said Hagrid in a shaking voice. "Shall we — shall we do it, then?"

The three of them stepped out into the back garden. The moon was glistening palely through the trees now, and its rays mingled with the light spilling from Hagrid's window to illuminate Aragog's body lying on the edge of a massive pit beside a ten-foot- high mound of freshly dug earth.

"Magnificent," said Slughorn, approaching the spider's head, where eight milky eyes stared blankly at the sky and two huge, curved pincers shone, motionless, in the moonlight. Harry thought he heard the tinkle of bottles as Slughorn bent over the pincers, apparently examining the enormous hairy head.

"It's not ev'ryone appreciates how beautiful they are," said Hagrid to Slughorn's back, tears leaking from the corners of his crinkled eyes. "I didn't know yeh were interested in creatures like Aragog, Horace."

"Interested? My dear Hagrid, I revere them," said Slughorn, stepping back from the body. Harry saw the glint of a bottle disappear beneath his cloak,

though Hagrid, mopping his eyes once more, noticed nothing. "Now . . . shall we proceed to the burial?"

Hagrid nodded and moved forward. He heaved the gigantic spider into his arms and, with an enormous grunt, rolled it into the dark pit. It hit the bottom with a rather horrible, crunchy thud. Hagrid started to cry again.

"Of course, it's difficult for you, who knew him best," said Slughorn, who like Harry could reach no higher than Hagrid's elbow, but patted it all the same. "Why don't I say a few words?"

He must have got a lot of good quality venom from Aragog, Harry thought, for Slughorn wore a satisfied smirk as he stepped up to the rim of the pit and said, in a slow, impressive voice, "Farewell, Aragog, king of arachnids, whose long and faithful friendship those who knew you won't forget! Though your body will decay, your spirit lingers on in the quiet, web-spun places of your forest home. May your many-eyed descendants ever flourish and your human friends find solace for the loss they have sustained."

"Tha was . . . tha was . . . beau'iful!" howled Hagrid, and he collapsed onto the compost heap, crying harder than ever.

"There, there," said Slughorn, waving his wand so that the huge pile of earth rose up and then fell, with a muffled sort of crash, onto the dead spider, forming a smooth mound. "Let's get inside and have a drink. Get on his other side, Harry. . . . That's it. . . . Up you come, Hagrid . . . Well done . . ."

They deposited Hagrid in a chair at the table. Fang, who had been skulking in his basket during the burial, now came padding softly across to them and put his heavy head into Harry's lap as usual. Slughorn uncorked one of the bottles of wine he had brought.

"I have had it all tested for poison," he assured Harry, pouring most of the first bottle into one of Hagrid's bucket-sized mugs and handing it to Hagrid. "Had a house-elf taste every bottle after what happened to your poor friend Rupert."

Harry saw, in his mind's eye, the expression on Hermione's face if she ever heard about this abuse of houseelves, and decided never to mention it to her.

"One for Harry . . ." said Slughorn, dividing a second bottle between two mugs, ". . . and one for me. Well" — he raised his mug high — "to Aragog."

"Aragog," said Harry and Hagrid together. Both Slughorn and Hagrid drank deeply. Harry, however, with the way ahead illuminated for him by Felix Felicis, knew that he must not drink, so he merely pretended to take a gulp and then set the mug back on the table before him.

"I had him from an egg, yeh know," said Hagrid morosely. "'Tiny little thing he was when he hatched. 'Bout the size of a Pekingese'"

"Sweet," said Slughorn.

"Used ter keep him in a cupboard up at the school until . . . well..."

Hagrid's face darkened and Harry knew why: Tom Riddle had contrived to have Hagrid thrown out of school, blamed for opening the Chamber of Secrets. Slughorn, however, did not seem to be listening; he was looking up at the ceiling, from which a number of brass pots hung, and also a long, silky skein of bright white hair.

"That's not unicorn hair, Hagrid?"

"Oh, yeah," said Hagrid indifferently. "Gets pulled out of their tails, they catch it on branches an' stuff in the forest, yeh know ..."

"But my dear chap, do you know how much that's worth?"

"I use it fer bindin' on bandages an stuff if a creature gets in jured," said Hagrid, shrugging. "It's dead useful. . . very strong."

Slughorn took another deep draught from his mug, his eyes moving carefully around the cabin now, looking, Harry knew, for more treasures that he might be able to convert into a plentiful supply of oak-matured mead, crystalized pineapple, and velvet smok-ing jackets. He refilled Hagrid's mug and his own, and questioned him about the creatures that lived in the forest these days and how Hagrid was able to look after them all. Hagrid, becoming expansive under the influence of the drink and Slughorn's

flattering in-terest, stopped mopping his eyes and entered happily into a long explanation of bowtruckle husbandry.

The Felix Felicis gave Harry a little nudge at this point, and he noticed that the supply of drink that Slughorn had brought was running out fast. Harry had not yet managed to bring off the Re-filling Charm without saying the incantation aloud, but the idea that he might not be able to do it tonight was laughable: Indeed, Harry grinned to himself as, unnoticed by either Hagrid or Slug-liorn (now swapping tales of the illegal trade in dragon eggs) he pointed his wand under the table at the emptying bottles and they immediately began to refill.

After an hour or so, Hagrid and Slughorn began making extravagant toasts: to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore, to elf-made wine, and to-

"Harry Potter!" bellowed Hagrid, slopping some of his fourteenth bucket of wine down his chin as he drained it.

"Yes, indeed," cried Slughorn a little thickly, "Parry Otter, the Chosen Boy Who — well — something of that sort," he mumbled, and drained his mug too.

Not long after this, Hagrid became tearful again and pressed the whole unicorn tail upon Slughorn, who pocketed it with cries of, "To friendship! To generosity! To ten Galleons a hair!"

And for a while after that, Hagrid and Slughorn were sitting side by side, arms around each other, singing a slow sad song about a dying wizard called Odo.

"Aaargh, the good die young," muttered Hagrid, slumping low onto the table, a little cross-eyed, while Slughorn continued to war-ble the refrain. "Me dad was no age ter go ... nor were yer mum' an' dad, Harry . . ."

Great fat tears oozed out of the corners of Hagrid's crinkled eyes again; he grasped Harry's arm and shook it

"Bes' wiz and witchard o' their age ... I never knew.. . terrible thing . . . terrible thing ..."

"And Odo the hero, they bore him back home

To the place that he'd known as a lad,"

sang Slughorn plaintively.

"They laid him to rest with his hat inside out.

And his wand snapped in two, which was sad."

". . . terrible," Hagrid grunted, and his great shaggy head rolled sideways onto his arms and he fell asleep, snoring deeply.

"Sorry," said Slughorn with a hiccup. "Can't carry a tune to save my life."

"Hagrid wasn't talking about your singing," said Harry quietly. "He was talking about my mum and dad dying."

"Oh," said Slughorn, repressing a large belch. "Oh dear. Yes, that was — was terrible indeed. Terrible . . . terrible ..."

He looked quite at a loss for what to say, and resorted to refilling their mugs.

"I don't — don't suppose you remember it, Harry?" he asked awkwardly.

"No — well, I was only one when they died," said Harry, his eyes on the flame of the candle flickering in Hagrid's heavy snores. "But I've found out pretty much what happened since. My dad died first. Did you know that?"

"I — I didn't," said Slughorn in a hushed voice.

"Yeah . . . Voldemort murdered him and then stepped over his body toward my mum," said Harry.

Slughorn gave a great shudder, but he did not seem able to tear his horrified gaze away from Harry's face.

"He told her to get out of the way," said Harry remorselessly. "He told me she needn't have died. He only wanted me. She could have run."

"Oh dear," breathed Slughorn. "She could have . . . she needn't . . . That's awful. . . ."

"It is, isn't it?" said Harry, in a voice barely more than a whisper. "But she didn't move. Dad was already dead, but she didn't want me to go too. She tried to plead with Voldemort. . . but he just laughed...."

"That's enough!" said Slughorn suddenly, raising a shaking hand. "Really, my dear boy, enough . . . I'm an old man ... I don't need to hear ... I don't want to hear ..."

"I forgot," lied Harry, Felix Felicis leading him on. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"Liked her?" said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. "I don't imagine anyone who met her wouldn't have liked her. . . . Very brave . . . Very funny... It was the most horrible thing. ..."

"But you won't help her son," said Harry. "She gave me her life, but you won't give me a memory."

Hagrid's rumbling snores filled the cabin. Harry looked steadily into Slughorn's tear-filled eyes. The Potions master seemed unable to look away.

"Don't say that," he whispered. "It isn't a question ... If it were to help you, of course . . . but no purpose can be served . . ."

"It can," said Harry clearly. "Dumbledore needs information. I need information."

He knew he was safe: Felix was telling him that Slughorn would remember nothing of this in the morning. Looking Slughorn straight in the eye, Harry leaned forward a little.

"I am the Chosen One. I have to kill him. I need that memory."

Slughorn turned paler than ever; his shiny forehead gleamed with sweat.

"You are the Chosen One?" . . . I.

"Of course I am," said Harry calmly.

"But then . . . my dear boy . . . you're asking a great deal. . . you're asking me, in fact, to aid you in your attempt to destroy—"

"You don't want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?"

"Harry, Harry, of course I do, but —"

"You're scared he'll find out you helped me?"

Slughorn said nothing; he looked terrified.

"Be brave like my mother, Professor. . . ."

Slughorn raised a pudgy hand and pressed his shaking fingers to his mouth; he looked for a moment like an enormously overgrown baby.

"I am not proud . . ." he whispered through his fingers. "I am ashamed of what — of what that memory shows. ... I think I may have done great damage that day. ..."

"You'd cancel out anything you did by giving me the memory," said Harry. "It would be a very brave and noble thing to do."

Hagrid twitched in his sleep and snored on. Slughorn and Harry stared at each other over the guttering candle. There was a long, long silence, but Felix Felicis told Harry not to break it, to wait. Then, very slowly, Slughorn put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wand. He put his other hand inside his cloak and took out a small, empty bottle. Still looking into Harry's eyes, Slughorn touched the tip of his wand to his temple and withdrew it, so that a long, silver thread of memory came away too, clinging to the wand tip. Longer and longer the memory stretched until it broke and swung, silvery bright, from the wand. Slughorn lowered it into the bottle where it coiled, then spread, swirling like gas. He corked the bottle with a trembling hand and then passed it across the table to Harry.

"Thank you very much, Professor."

"You're a good boy," said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. "And you've got her eyes. . . . Just don't think too badly of me once you've seen it. . . ."

And he too put his head on his arms, gave a deep sigh, and fell asleep.

Chapter 23: Horcruxes

Harry could feel the Felix Felicis wearing off as he crept back into the castle. The front door had remained unlocked for him, but on the third floor he met Peeves and only narrowly avoided detection by diving sideways through one of his shortcuts. By the time he got up to the portrait of the Fat Lady and pulled off his Invisibility Cloak, he was not surprised to find her in a most unhelpful mood.

"What sort of time do you call this?"

"I'm really sorry — I had to go out for something important —"

"Well, the password changed at midnight, so you'll just have to sleep in the corridor, won't you?"

"You're joking!" said Harry. "Why did it have to change at midnight?"

"That's the way it is," said the Fat Lady. "If you're angry, go and take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tightened security."

"Fantastic," said Harry bitterly, looking around at the hard floor. "Really brilliant. Yeah, I would go and take it up with Dumbledore if he was here, because he's the one who wanted me to —"

"He is here," said a voice behind Harry. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago."

Nearly Headless Nick was gliding toward Harry, his head wobbling as usual upon his ruff.

"I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive," said Nick. "He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good spirits, though a little tired, of course."

"Where is he?" said Harry, his heart leaping,

"Oh, groaning and clanking up on the Astronomy Tower, it's a favorite pastime of his —"

"Not the Bloody Baron — Dumbledore!"

"Oh — in his office," said Nick. "I believe, from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in —"

"Yeah, he has," said Harry, excitement blazing in his chest at the prospect of telling Dumbledore he had secured the memory. He wheeled about and sprinted off again, ignoring the Fat Lady who was calling after him.

"Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password's still 'tapeworm!'"

But Harry was already hurtling back along the corridor and within minutes, he was saying "toffee eclairs" to Dumbledore's gar-goyle, which leapt aside, permitting Harry entrance onto the spiral staircase.

"Enter," said Dumbledore when Harry knocked. He sounded exhausted. Harry pushed open the door. There was Dumbledore's office, looking the same as ever, but with black, star-strewn skies beyond the windows.

"Good gracious, Harry," said Dumbledore in surprise. "To what do I owe this very late pleasure?"

"Sir — I've got it. I've got the memory from Slughorn."

Harry pulled out the tiny glass bottle and showed it to Dumbledore. For a moment or two, the headmaster looked stunned. Then his face split in a wide smile.

"Harry, this is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!"

All thought of the lateness of the hour apparently forgotten, he hurried around his desk, took the bottle with Slughorn's memory in his uninjured hand, and strode over to the cabinet where he kept the Pensieve.

"And now," said Dumbledore, placing the stone basin upon the desk and emptying the contents of the bottle into it. "Now, at last. we shall see. Harry, quickly . . ."

Harry bowed obediently over the Pensieve and felt his feet leave the office floor. . . . Once again he fell through darkness and landed in Horace Slughorn's office many years before. There was the much younger Slughorn, with his thick, shiny, straw-colored hair and his gingery-blond mustache, sitting again in the comfortable winged armchair in his office, his feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, a small glass of wine in one hand, the other rummaging in a box of crystallized pineapple. And there were the half dozen teenage boys sitting around Slughorn with Tom Riddle in the midst of them, Marvolo's gold-and-black ring gleaming on his finger.

Dumbledore landed beside Harry just as Riddle asked, "Sir is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wag-ging his finger reprovingly at Riddle, though winking at the same time. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite —" Several of the boys tittered again. "— I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple, I have excellent contacts at the Ministry."

Tom Riddle merely smiled as the others laughed again. Harry noticed that he was by no means the eldest of the group of boys, but that they all seemed to look to him as their leader.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," he said when the laughter had died away. "I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing."

A couple of the boys around him smirked at each other. Harry was sure they were enjoying a private joke, undoubtedly about what they knew, or suspected, regarding their gang leader's famous ancestor.

"Nonsense," said Slughorn briskly, "couldn't be plainer you come from decent Wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you'll go far, Tom, I've never been wrong about a student yet."

The small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock behind him and he looked around.

"Good gracious, is it that time already? You'd better get going boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrangle, I want your essay by in morrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

One by one, the boys filed out of the room. Slughorn heaved himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk. A movement behind him made him look around; Riddle was still standing there.

"Look shar

p, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect.. ."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something." -' "Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about. . . about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn stared at him, his thick ringers absentmindedly clawing the stem of his wine glass.

"Project for Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it?"

But Harry could tell that Slughorn knew perfectly well that this was not schoolwork.

"Not exactly, sir," said Riddle. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it."

"No . . . well. . . you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed," said Slughorn.

"But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you — sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously — I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could — so I just thought I'd —"

It was very well done, thought Harry, the hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone. He, Harry, had had too much experience of trying to wheedle information out of re-luctant people not to recognize a master at work. He could tell that Riddle wanted the information very, very much; perhaps had been working toward this moment for weeks.

"Well," said Slughorn, not looking at Riddle, but fiddling with the ribbon on top of his box of crystallized pineapple, "well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul."

"I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir," said Riddle.

His voice was carefully controlled, but Harry could sense his excitement.

"Well, you split your soul, you see," said Slughorn, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form ..."

Slughorn's face crumpled and Harry found himself remembering words he had heard nearly two years before: "I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost. . . but still, I was alive."

"... few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable."

But Riddle's hunger was now apparent; his expression was greedy, he could no longer hide his longing.

"How do you split your soul?"

"Well," said Slughorn uncomfortably, "you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature."

"But how do you do it?"

"By an act of evil — the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —"

"Encase? But how — ?"

"There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know!" said Slughorn shaking his head like an old elephant bothered by mosquitoes. "Do I look as though I have tried it — do I look like a killer?"

"No, sir, of course not," said Riddle quickly. "I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to offend . . ."

"Not at all, not at all, not offended," said Slughorn gruffly, "It is natural to feel some curiosity about these things. . . . Wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic. . . ."

"Yes, sir," said Riddle. "What I don't understand, though — just out of curiosity — I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven — ?"

"Merlin's beard, Tom!" yelped Slughorn. "Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case . . . bad enough to divide the soul . . . but to rip it into seven pieces . . ."

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and Harry could tell that he was regretting entering into the conversation at all.

"Of course," he muttered, "this is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic . . ."

"Yes, sir, of course," said Riddle quickly.

"But all the same, Tom . . . keep it quiet, what I've told — that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know. . . . Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it. . . ."

"I won't say a word, sir," said Riddle, and he left, but not before Harry had glimpsed his face, which was full of that same wild happiness it had worn when he had first found out that he was a wizard, the sort of happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, less human. . . .

"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Let us go. . . ."

When Harry landed back on the office floor Dumbledore was ; already sitting down behind his desk. Harry sat too and waited for Dumbledore to speak.

"I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time," said Dumbledore at last. "It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right, and also how very far there is still to go. . . ."

Harry suddenly noticed that every single one of the old head-masters and headmistresses in the portraits around the walls was awake and listening in on their conversation. A corpulent, red nosed wizard had actually taken out an ear trumpet.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as you are now, give or take a few months, Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal."

"You think he succeeded then, sir?" asked Harry. "He made a Horcrux? And that's why he didn't die when he attacked me? He had a Horcrux hidden somewhere? A bit of his soul was safe?"

"A bit... or more," said Dumbledore. "You heard Voldemort, what he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion on what would happen to the wizard who created more than one Horcrux, what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcrux. No book would have given him that information. As far as I know — as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew — no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, marshaling his thought, and then said, "Four years ago, I received what I considered certain proof that Voldemort had split his soul."

"Where?" asked Harry. "How?"

"You handed it to me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "The diary, Riddle's diary, the one giving instructions on how to reopen the Chamber of Secrets."

"I don't understand, sir," said Harry.

"Well, although I did not see the Riddle who came out of the diary, what you described to me was a phenomenon I had never witnessed. A mere memory starting to act and think for itself? A mere memory, sapping the life

out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen? No, something much more sinister had lived inside that book. ... a fragment of soul, I was almost sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered. What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard."

"I still don't understand," said Harry.

"Well, it worked as a Horcrux is supposed to work — in other words, the fragment of soul concealed inside it was kept safe and had undoubtedly played its part in preventing the death of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess some-body else, so that Slytherin's monster would be unleashed again."

"Well, he didn't want his hard work to be wasted," said Harry. "He wanted people to know he was Slytherin's heir, because he couldn't take credit at the time."

"Quite correct," said Dumbledore, nodding. "But don't you see, Harry, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or planted on, some future Hogwarts student, he was being remarkably blase about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn explained, to keep part of the self hidden and safe, not to fling it into somebody else's path and run the risk that they might destroy it — as indeed happened: That particular fragment of soul is no more; you saw to that."

The careless way in which Voldemort regarded this Horcrux seemed most ominous to me. It suggested that he must have made — or had been planning to make — more Horcruxes, so that the loss of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to believe it, but nothing else seemed to make sense. Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Voldemort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating and alarming statement to his Death Eaters. 'I who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.' That was what you told me he said. 'Further than anybody!' And I thought I knew what that meant, though the Death Eaters did not. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Harry, which I don't believe any other wizard has ever had. Yet it fitted: Lord Voldemort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he had undergone seemed to me to be only explainable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call 'usual evil' . . ."

"So he's made himself impossible to kill by murdering other people?" said Harry. "Why couldn't he make a Sorcerer's Stone, or steal one, if he was so interested in immortality?"

"Well, we know that he tried to do just that, five years ago," said Dumbledore. "But there are several reasons why, I think, a Sorcerer's Stone would appeal less than Horcruxes to Lord Voldemort,

"While the Elixir of Life does indeed extend life, it must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain the immortality. Therefore, Voldemort would be entirely dependant on the Elixir, and if it ran

out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was stolen, he would die just like any other man. Voldemort likes to operate alone, remember. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable. Of course he was prepared to drink it if it would take him out of the horrible part-life to which he was condemned after attacking you, but only to regain a body. Thereafter, I am convinced, he intended to continue to rely on his Horcruxes. He would need nothing more, if only he could regain a human form. He was already im-mortal, you see ... or as close to immortal as any man can be. But now, Harry, armed with this information, the crucial memory you have succeeded in procuring for us, we are closer to the secret of finishing Lord Voldemort than anyone has ever been before. You heard him, Harry: 'Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces . . . isn't seven the most powerfully magical number . . .' Isn't seven the most powerfully magical number. Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort."

"He made seven Horcruxes?" said Harry, horror-struck, while several of the portraits on the walls made similar noises of shock mid outrage. "But they could be anywhere in the world — hidden — buried or invisible —"

"I am glad to see you appreciate the magnitude of the problem," said Dumbledore calmly. "But firstly, no, Harry, not seven Hor-cruces: six. The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile; without that, he has no self at all. That seventh piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack — the piece that lives in his body."

"But the six Horcruxes, then," said Harry, a little desperately, "how are we supposed to find them?"

"You are forgetting . . . you have already destroyed one of them. And I have destroyed another."

"You have?" said Harry eagerly.

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore, and he raised his blackened, burned-looking hand. "The ring, Harry. Marvolo's ring. And a terrible curse there was upon it too. Had it not been — forgive me the lack of seemly modesty — for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape's timely action when I returned to Hogwarts, desperately injured, I might not have lived to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul. The ring is no longer a Horcrux."

"But how did you find it?"

"Well, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort's past life. I have traveled widely, visiting those places he once knew. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunt's house. It seems that once Voldemort had succeeded in sealing a piece of his soul inside it, he did not want to wear it anymore. He hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived (Morfino having been carted off to

Azkaban, of course), never guessing that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical concealment.

"However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right in our theory of a seven-part soul, four Horcruxes remain."

"And they could be anything?" said Harry. "They could be oh, in tin cans or, I dunno, empty potion bottles. . . ."

"You are thinking of Portkeys, Harry, which must be ordinary objects, easy to overlook. But would Lord Voldemort use tin cans or old potion bottles to guard his own precious soul? You are forgetting what I have showed you. Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a powerful magical history His pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things, suggest to me that Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxr with some care, favoring objects worthy of the honor."

"The diary wasn't that special."

"The diary, as you have said yourself, was proof that he was the Hire of Slytherin. I am sure that Voldemort considered it of stu-pendous importance."

"So, the other Horcruxes?" said Harry. "Do you think you know what they are, sir?"

"I can only guess," said Dumbledore. "For the reasons I have already given, I believe that Lord Voldemort would prefer objects that, in themselves, have a certain grandeur. I have therefore trawled back through Voldemort's past to see if I can find evidence that such artifacts have disappeared around him."

"The locket!" said Harry loudly, "Hufflepuff's cup!"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, smiling, "I would be prepared to bet — perhaps not my other hand — but a couple of fingers, that they became Horcruxes three and four. The remaining two, assuming again that he created a total of six, are more of a problem, but I will hazard a guess that, having secured objects from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, he set out to track down objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort's imagination. I cannot answer for whether he ever managed to find anything of Ravenclaw's. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains safe."

Dumbledore pointed his blackened fingers to the wall behind him, where a ruby-encrusted sword reposed within a glass case.

"Do you think that's why he really wanted to come back to Hogwarts, sir?" said Harry. "To try and find something from one of the other founders?"

"My thoughts precisely," said Dumbledore. "But unfortunately, that does not advance us much further, for he was turned away, or so I believe, without the chance to search the school. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founders' objects. He definitely had two — he may have found three — that is the best we can do for now."

"Even if he got something of Ravenclaw's or of Gryffindor's, that leaves a sixth Horcrux," said Harry, counting on his fingers. "Unless he's got both?"

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore. "I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behavior of the snake, Nagini?"

"The snake?" said Harry, startled. "You can use animals as Horcruxes?"

"Well, it is inadvisable to do so," said Dumbledore, "because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think and move for itself is obviously a very risky business. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents' house with the intention of killing you. He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly have been that. He believed that in killing you, he was

destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible. I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death. As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might then have occurred to him to turn her into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemort's mystique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth."

"So," said Harry, "the diary's gone, the ring's gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact, and you think there might be a Horcrux that was once Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's?"

"An admirably succinct and accurate summary, yes," said Dumbledore, bowing his head.

"So . . . are you still looking for them, sir? Is that where you've been going when you've been leaving the school?"

"Correct," said Dumbledore. "I have been looking for a very long time. I think. . . perhaps . . . I may be close to finding another one. There are hopeful signs."

"And if you do," said Harry quickly, "can I come with you and help get rid of it?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry very intently for a moment before saying, "Yes, I think so."

"I can?" said Harry, thoroughly taken aback.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. "I think you have earned that right."

Harry felt his heart lift. It was very good not to hear words of caution and protection for once. The headmasters and head-mistresses around the walls seemed less impressed by Dumbledore's decision; Harry saw a few of them shaking their heads and Phineas Nigellus actually snorted.

"Does Voldemort know when a Horcrux is destroyed, sir? Can he feel it?" Harry asked, ignoring the portraits.

"A very interesting question, Harry. I believe not. I believe that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these crucial parts of himself have been detached for so long, he does not feel as we do. Perhaps, at the point of death, he might be aware of his loss . . . but he was not aware, for instance, that the diary had been destroyed until he forced the truth out of Lucius Malfoy. When Voldemort discovered that the diary had been mutilated and robbed of all its powers, I am told that his anger was terrible to behold."

"But I thought he meant Lucius Malfoy to smuggle it into Hogwarts?"

"Yes, he did, years ago, when he was sure he would be able to create more Horcruxes, but still Lucius was supposed to wait for Voldemorts say-so, and he never received it, for Voldemort vanished shortly after giving him the diary. No doubt he thought that Lucius would not dare do anything with the Horcrux other than guard it carefully, but he was counting too much upon Lucius's fear of a master who had been gone for years and whom Lucius believed dead. Of course, Lucius did not know what the diary really was. I understand that Voldemort had told him the diary would cause the Chamber of Secrets to reopen because it was cleverly enchanted. Had Lucius known he held a portion of his masters soul in his hands, he would undoubtedly have treated it with more reverence — but instead he went ahead and carried out the old plan for his own ends. By planting the diary upon Arthur Weasleys daughter, he hoped to discredit Arthur and get rid of a highly incriminating magical object in one stroke. Ah, poor Lucius . . . what with Voldemorts fury about the fact that he threw away the Horcrux for his own gain, and the fiasco at the Ministry last year, I would not be surprised if he is not secretly glad to be safe in Azkaban at the moment."

Harry sat in thought for a moment, then asked, "So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort could be killed?"

"Yes, I think so," said Dumbledore. "Without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul. Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged beyond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even without his Horcruxes."

"But I haven't got uncommon skill and power," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

"Yes, you have," said Dumbledore firmly. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can —"

"I know!" said Harry impatiently. "I can love!" It was only with difficulty that he stopped himself adding, "Big deal!"

"Yes, Harry, you can love," said Dumbledore, who looked as though he knew perfectly well what Harry had just refrained from saying. "Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Harry."

"So, when the prophecy says that I'll have 'power the Dark Lord knows not,' it just means — love?" asked Harry, feeling a little let down.

"Yes — just love," said Dumbledore. "But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. I told you this at the end of last year. Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him — and in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dangerous to him!"

"But it comes to the same —"

"No, it doesn't!" said Dumbledore, sounding impatient now. Pointing at Harry with his black, withered hand, he said, "You are setting too much store by the prophecy!"

"But," spluttered Harry, "but you said the prophecy means —"

"If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? Would it have meant anything? Of course not! Ho you think every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?"

"But," said Harry, bewildered, "but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other —"

"Harry, Harry, only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney's words! If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could not penetrate? Of course not, Harry! Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different! Always he was on the lookout for the one who would challenge him. He heard the prophecy and he leapt into ac-tion, with the result that he not only handpicked the man most likely to finish him, he handed him uniquely deadly weapons!"

"But —"

"It is essential that you understand this!" said Dumbledore, standing up and striding about the room, his glittering robes swooshing in his wake; Harry had never seen him so agitated. "By attempting to kill you, Voldemort himself singled out the remarkable person who sits here in front of me, and gave him the tools for the job! It is Voldemort's fault that you were able to see into his thoughts, his ambitions, that you even understand the snakelike language in which he gives orders, and yet, Harry, despite your privileged insight into Voldemort's world (which, incidentally, is a gift any Death Eater would kill to have), you have never been seduced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers!"

"Of course I haven't!" said Harry indignantly. "He killed my mum and dad!"

"You are protected, in short, by your ability to love!" said Dumbledore loudly. "The only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's! In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not! But he knows it now. You have flitted into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage to yourself, but he cannot possess you

with-out enduring mortal agony, as he discovered in the Ministry. I do not think he understands why, Harry, but then, he was in such a hurry to mutilate his own soul, he never paused to understand the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole."

"But, sir," said Harry, making valiant efforts not to sound argumentative, "it all comes to the same thing, doesn't it? I've got to try and kill him, or —"

"Got to?" said Dumbledore. "Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment,

that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!"

Harry watched Dumbledore striding up and down in front of him, and thought. He thought of his mother, his father, and Sirius. He thought of Cedric Diggory. He thought of all the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done. A flame seemed to leap inside his chest, searing his throat.

"I'd want him finished," said Harry quietly. "And I'd want to do it."

"Of course you would!" cried Dumbledore. "You see, the prophecy does not mean you have to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to mark you as his equal. ... In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy! But Voldemort continues to set

store by the prophecy. He will continue to hunt you . . . which makes it certain, really, that —"

"That one of us is going to end up killing the other," said Harry. "Yes."

But he understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew — and so do I, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, and so did my parents — that there was all the difference in the world.

Chapter 24: Sectumsempra

Exhausted but delighted with his night's work, Harry told Ron and Hermione everything that had happened during next morning's Charms lesson (having first cast the Muffliato spell upon those nearest them). They were both satisfyingly impressed by the way he had wheedled the memory out of Slughorn and positively awed when he told them about Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along, should he find another one.

"Wow," said Ron, when Harry had finally finished telling them everything; Ron was waving his wand very vaguely in the direction of the ceiling without paying the slightest bit of attention to what he was doing. "Wow. You're actually going to go with Dumbledore . . . and try and destroy . . . wow."

"Ron, you're making it snow," said Hermione patiently, grabbing his wrist and redirecting his wand away from the ceiling from which, sure enough, large white flakes had started to fall. Lavender Brown, Harry noticed, glared at Hermione from a neighboring table through very red eyes, and Hermione immediately let go of Ron's arm.

"Oh yeah," said Ron, looking down at his shoulders in vague surprise. "Sorry... looks like we've all got horrible dandruff now. ..."

He brushed some of the fake snow off Hermione's shoulder. Lavender burst into tears. Ron looked immensely guilty and turned his back on her.

"We split up," he told Harry out of the corner of his mouth, "Last night. When she saw me coming out of the dormitory with Hermione. Obviously she couldn't see you, so she thought it had just been the two of us."

"Ah," said Harry. "Well — you don't mind it's over, do you?", "No," Ron admitted. "It was pretty bad while she was yelling, but at least I didn't have to finish it."

"Coward," said Hermione, though she looked amused. "Well, it was a bad night for romance all around. Ginny and Dean split up too, Harry."

Harry thought there was a rather knowing look in her eye as she told him that, but she could not possibly know that his insides were suddenly dancing the conga. Keeping his face as immobile and his voice as indifferent as he could, he asked, "How come?"

"Oh, something really silly . . . She said he was always trying to help her through the portrait hole, like she couldn't climb in herself . . . but they've been a bit rocky for ages."

Harry glanced over at Dean on the other side of the classroom. He certainly looked unhappy.

"Of course, this puts you in a bit of a dilemma, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"What d'you mean?" said Harry quickly.

"The Quidditch team," said Hermione. "If Ginny and Dean aren't speaking . . ."

"Oh — oh yeah," said Harry.

"Flitwick," said Ron in a warning tone. The tiny little Charms master was bobbing his way toward them, and Hermione was the only one who had managed to turn vinegar into wine; her glass flask was full of deep crimson liquid, whereas the contents of Harry's and Ron's were still murky brown.

"Now, now, boys," squeaked Professor Flitwick reproachfully. "A little less talk, a little more action . . . Let me see you try. . . ."

Together they raised their wands, concentrating with all their might, and pointed them at their flasks. Harry's vinegar turned to ice; Ron's flask exploded.

"Yes ... for homework," said Professor Flitwick, reemerging from under the table and pulling shards of glass out of the top of his hat, "practice."

They had one of their rare joint free periods after Charms and walked back to the common room together. Ron seemed to be positively lighthearted about the end of his relationship with Lavender, and Hermione seemed cheery too, though when asked what she was grinning about she simply said, "It's a nice day." Neither of them seemed to have noticed that a fierce battle was raging inside Harry's brain:

She's Rons sister.

But she's ditched Dean!

She's still Rons sister.

I'm his best mate!

That'll make it worse.

If I talked to him first —

He'd hit you.

What if I don't care?

He's your best mate!

Harry barely noticed that they were climbing through the portrait hole into the sunny common room, and only vaguely registered the small group of seventh years clustered together there, until Hermione cried, "Katie! You're back! Are you okay?"

Harry stared: It was indeed Katie Bell, looking completely healthy and surrounded by her jubilant friends.

"I'm really well!" she said happily. "They let me out of St. Mungos on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum and Dad and then came back here this morning. Leanne was just telling me about McLaggen and the last match, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah," said Harry, "well, now you're back and Ron's fit, we'll have a decent chance of thrashing Ravenclaw, which means we could still be in the running for the Cup. Listen, Katie . . ."

He had to put the question to her at once; his curiosity even drove Ginny temporarily from his brain. He dropped his voice as Katie's friends started gathering up their things; apparently they were late for Transfiguration.

". . . that necklace . . . can you remember who gave it to you now?"

"No," said Katie, shaking her head ruefully. "Everyone's been asking me, but I haven't got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies' in the Three Broomsticks."

"You definitely went into the bathroom, then?" said Hermione.

"Well, I know I pushed open the door," said Katie, "so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory's a blank

until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo's. Listen, I'd better go, I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back. ..."

She caught up her bag and books and hurried after her friends, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to sit down at a window table and ponder what she had told them.

"So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace," said Hermione, "to be in the ladies' bathroom."

"Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman," said Harry. "Don't forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion at Hog-warts. We know some of it got stolen. . . ."

In his mind's eye, he watched a parade of Crabbes and Goyles prance past, all transformed into girls.

"I think I'm going to take another swig of Felix," said Harry, "and have a go at the Room of Requirement again."

"That would be a complete waste of potion," said Hermione flatly, putting down the copy of Spellmans Syllabary she had just taken out of her bag. "Luck can only get you so far, Harry. The situation with Slughorn was different; you always had the ability to persuade him, you just needed to tweak the circumstances a bit. Luck isn't enough to get you through a powerful enchantment, though. Don't go wasting the rest of that potion!"

You'll need all the luck you can get if Dumbledore takes you along with him ..." She dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Couldn't we make some more?" Ron asked Harry, ignoring Hermione. "It'd be great to have a stock of it. ... Have a look in the book... "

Harry pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag, and looked up Felix Felicis.

"Blimey, its seriously complicated," he said, running an eye down the list of ingredients. "And it takes six months,.. You've got to let it stew. ..."

"Typical," said Ron.

Harry was about to put his book away again when he noticed the corner of a page folded down; turning to it, he saw the Sectum-sempra spell, captioned "For Enemies," that he had marked a few weeks previously. He had still not found out what it did, mainly because he did not want to test it around Hermione, but he was considering trying it out on McLaggen next time he came up behind him unawares.

The only person who was not particularly pleased to see Katie Bell back at school was Dean Thomas, because he would no longer be required to fill her place as Chaser. He took the blow stoically enough when Harry told him, merely grunting and shrugging, but Harry had the distinct feeling as he walked away that Dean and Seamus were muttering mutinously behind his back.

The following fortnight saw the best Quidditch practices Harry had known as Captain. His team was so pleased to be rid of McLaggen, so glad to have Katie back at last, that they were flying extremely well.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. Her imitations of Ron anxiously bobbing up and down in front of the goal posts as the Quaffle sped toward him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold, kept them all highly amused. Harry, laughing with the others, was glad to have an innocent reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because he had not been keeping his eyes on the Snitch.

The battle still raged inside his head: Ginny or Ron? Sometimes he thought that the post-Lavender Ron might not mind too much if he asked Ginny out, but then he remembered Ron's expression when he had seen her kissing Dean, and was sure that Ron would consider it base treachery if Harry so much as held her hand. . . .

Yet Harry could not help himself talking to Ginny, laughing with her, walking back from practice with her; however much his conscience ached, he found himself wondering how best to get her on her own. It would have been ideal if Slughorn had given another of his little parties, for Ron would not be around — but unfortunately, Slughorn seemed to have given them up. Once or twice Harry considered asking for Hermione's help, but he did not think he could stand seeing the smug look on her face; he thought he caught

it sometimes when Hermione spotted him staring at Ginny or laughing at her jokes. And to complicate matters, he had the nagging worry that if he didn't do it, somebody else was sure to ask Ginny out soon: He and Ron were at least agreed on the fact that she was too popular for her own good.

All in all, the temptation to take another gulp of Felix Felicis was becoming stronger by the day, for surely this was a case for, as Hermione put it, "tweaking the circumstances"? The balmy days slid gently through May, and Ron seemed to be there at Harry's shoulder every time he saw Ginny. Harry found himself longing for a stroke of luck that would somehow cause Ron to realize that nothing would make him happier than his best friend and his sister falling for each other and to leave them alone together for longer than a few seconds. There seemed no chance of either while the final Quidditch game of the season was looming; Ron wanted to talk tactics with Harry all the time and had little thought for anything else.

Ron was not unique in this respect; interest in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was running extremely high throughout the school, for the match would decide the Championship, which was still wide open. If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by a margin of three hundred points (a tall order, and yet Harry had never known his team to fly better) then they would win the Championship. If they won by less than three hundred points, they would come second to Ravenclaw; if they lost by a hundred points they would be third behind Hufflepuff and if they lost by more than a hundred, they would be in fourth place and nobody, Harry thought, would ever, ever let him forget that it had been he who had captained Gryffindor to their first bottom-of-the-table defeat in two centuries.

The run-up to this crucial match had all the usual features: members of rival Houses attempting to intimidate opposing teams in the corridors; unpleasant chants about individual players being rehearsed loudly as they passed; the team members themselves either swaggering around enjoying all the attention or else dashing into bathrooms between classes to throw up. Somehow, the game had become inextricably linked in Harry's mind with success or failure in his plans for Ginny. He could not help feeling that if they won by more than three hundred points, the scenes of euphoria and a nice loud after-match party might be just as good as a hearty swig of Felix Felicis.

In the midst of all his preoccupations, Harry had not forgotten his other ambition: finding out what Malfoy was up to in the Room of Requirement. He was still checking the Marauder's Map, and as he was unable to locate Malfoy on it, deduced that Malfoy was still spending plenty of time within the room. Although Harry was losing hope that he would ever succeed in getting inside the Room of Requirement, he attempted it whenever he was in the vicinity, but no matter how he reworded his request, the wall remained firmly doorless.

A few days before the match against Ravenclaw, Harry found himself walking down to dinner alone from the common room, Ron having rushed off into a nearby bathroom to throw up yet again, and Hermione having dashed off to see Professor Vector about a mistake she thought she might have made in her last Arithmancy essay. More out of habit than anything, Harry made his usual detour along the seventh-floor corridor, checking the

Marauder's Map as he went. For a moment he could not find Malfoy anywhere and assumed he must indeed be inside the Room of Requirement again, but then he saw Malfoy's tiny, labeled dot standing in a boys' bathroom on the floor below, accompanied, not by Crabbe or Goyle, but by Moaning Myrtle.

Harry only stopped staring at this unlikely coupling when he walked right into a suit of armor. The loud crash brought him out of his reverie; hurrying from the scene lest Filch turn up, he dashed down the marble staircase and along the passageway below. Outside the bathroom, he pressed his ear against the door. He could not hear anything. He very quietly pushed the door open.

Draco Malfoy was standing with his back to the door, his hands clutching either side of the sink, his white-blond head bowed.

"Don't," crooned Moaning Myrtle's voice from one of the cubicles. "Don't. . . tell me what's wrong ... I can help you. . . ."

"No one can help me," said Malfoy. His whole body was shaking. "I can't do it. ... I can't. ... It won't work . . . and unless I do it soon ... he says he'll kill me. ..."

And Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, that Malfoy was crying — actually crying — tears streaming down his pale face into the grimy basin. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a

great shudder, looked up into flu-cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him over his shoulder.

Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy's hex missed Harry by inches, shattering the lamp on the wall beside him; Harry threw himself sideways, thought Levicorpus! and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another —

"No! No! Stop it!" squealed Moaning Myrtle, her voice echoing loudly around the tiled room. "Stop! STOP!"

There was a loud bang and the bin behind Harry exploded; Harry attempted a Leg-Locker Curse that backfired off the wall behind Malfoy's ear and smashed the cistern beneath Moaning Myrtle, who screamed loudly; water poured everywhere and Harry slipped as Malfoy, his face contorted, cried, "Cruci —"

"SECTUMSEMPRA!" bellowed Harry from the floor, waving his wand wildly.

Blood spurted from Malfoy's face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the waterlogged floor with a great splash, his wand falling from his limp right hand.

"No —" gasped Harry.

Slipping and staggering, Harry got to his feet and plunged toward Malfoy, whose face was now shining scarlet, his white hands scrabbling at his blood-soaked chest.

"No — I didn't —"

Harry did not know what he was saying; he fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood. Moaning Myrtle let out a deafening scream: "MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"

The door banged open behind Harry and he looked up, terrified: Snape had burst into the room, his face livid. Pushing Harry roughly aside, he knelt over Malfoy, drew his wand, and traced it over the deep wounds Harry's curse had made, muttering an incantation that sounded almost like song. The flow of blood seemed to ease; Snape wiped the residue from Malfoy's face and repeated his spell. Now the wounds seemed to be knitting.

Harry was still watching, horrified by what he had done, barely aware that he too was soaked in blood and water. Moaning Myrtle was still sobbing and wailing overhead. When Snape had performed his countercurse for the third time, he half-lifted Malfoy into a standing position.

"You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that. . . . Come...."

He supported Malfoy across the bathroom, turning at the door to say in a voice of cold fury, "And you, Potter . . . You wait here for me."

It did not occur to Harry for a second to disobey. He stood up slowly, shaking, and looked down at the wet floor. There were bloodstains floating like crimson flowers across its surface. He could not even find it in himself to tell Moaning Myrtle to be quiet, as she continued to wail and sob with increasingly evident enjoyment.

Snape returned ten minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"Go," he said to Myrtle, and she swooped back into her toilet at once, leaving a ringing silence behind her.

"I didn't mean it to happen," said Harry at once. His voice echoed in the cold, watery space. "I didn't know what that spell did."

But Snape ignored this. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter," he said quietly. "Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?"

"I — read about it somewhere."

"Where?"

"It was — a library book," Harry invented wildly. "I can't remember what it was call —"

"Liar," said Snape. Harry's throat went dry. He knew what Snape was going to do and he had never been able to prevent it. ...

The bathroom seemed to shimmer before his eyes; he struggled to block out all thought, but try as he might, the Half-Blood Prince's copy of Advanced Potion-Making swam hazily to the forefront of his mind.

And then he was staring at Snape again, in the midst of this wrecked, soaked bathroom. He stared into Snape's black eyes, hoping against hope that Snape had not seen what he feared, but —

"Bring me your schoolbag," said Snape softly, "and all of your schoolbooks. All of them. Bring them to me here. Now!"

There was no point arguing. Harry turned at once and splashed

out of the bathroom. Once in the corridor, he broke into a run toward Gryffindor Tower. Most people were walking the other way; they gaped at him, drenched in water and blood, but he answered none of the questions fired at him as he ran past.

He felt stunned; it was as though a beloved pet had turned suddenly savage; what had the Prince been thinking to copy such a spell into his book? And what would happen when Snape saw it? Would he tell Slughorn

— Harry's stomach churned — how Harry had been achieving such good results in Potions all year? Would he confiscate or destroy the book that had taught Harry so much . . . the book that had become a kind of guide and friend? Harry could not let it happen. . . . He could not. . .

"Where've you — ? Why are you soaking — ? Is that blood." Ron was standing at the top of the stairs, looking bewildered at , the sight of Harry.

"I need your book," Harry panted. "Your Potions book. Quick . . . give it to me . . ."

"But what about the Half-Blood —"

"I'll explain later!"

Ron pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and handed it over; Harry sprinted off past him and back to the common room. Here, he seized his schoolbag, ignoring the amazed looks of several people who had already finished their dinner, threw himself back out of the portrait hole, and hurtled off along the seventh-floor corridor.

He skidded to a halt beside the tapestry of dancing trolls, closed his eyes, and began to walk.

I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. ...

Three times he walked up and down in front of the stretch of blank wall. When he opened his eyes, there it was at last: the door to the Room of Requirement. Harry wrenched it open, flung himself inside, and slammed it shut.

He gasped. Despite his haste, his panic, his fear of what awaited him back in the bathroom, he could not help but be overawed by what he was looking at. He was standing in a room the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by tetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, stowed away, perhaps, to hide the evidence of mishandled magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt banned or graffitied or stolen. There were winged catapults and Fanged Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were chipped bottles of congealed potions, hats, jewels, cloaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusting swords, and a heavy, bloodstained axe.

Harry hurried forward into one of the many alleyways between all this hidden treasure. He turned right past an enormous stuffed troll, ran on a short way, took a left at the broken Vanishing Cabinet in which Montague had got lost the previous year, finally pausing beside a large cupboard that seemed to have had acid thrown at its blistered surface. He opened one of the cupboard's creaking doors: It had already been used as a hiding place for

something in a cage that had long since died; its skeleton had five legs. He stuffed the Half-Blood Princes book behind the cage and slammed the door. He paused for a moment, his heart thumping horribly, gazing around at all the clutter. . . . Would he be able to find this spot again amidst all this junk? Seizing the chipped bust of an ugly old warlock from on top of a nearby crate, he stood it on top of the cupboard where the book was now hidden, perched a dusty old wig and a tarnished tiara on the statues head to make it more distinctive, then sprinted back through the alleyways of hidden junk as fast as he could go, back to the door, back out onto the corridor, where he slammed the door behind him, and it turned at once back into stone.

Harry ran flat-out toward the bathroom on the floor below, cramming Ron's copy of Advanced Potion-Making into his bag as he did so. A minute later, he was back in front of Snape, who held out his hand wordlessly for Harry's schoolbag. Harry handed it over, panting, a searing pain in his chest, and waited.

One by one, Snape extracted Harry's books and examined them., Finally, the only book left was the Potions book, which he looked at very carefully before speaking.

"This is your copy of Advanced Potion-Making, is it, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, still breathing hard.

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, with a touch more defiance.

"This is the copy of Advanced Potion-Making that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Then why," asked Snape, "does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

Harry's heart missed a beat. "That's my nickname," he said. '

"Your nickname," repeated Snape. ; "Yeah . . . that's what my friends call me," said Harry.

"I understand what a nickname is," said Snape. The cold, black eyes were boring once more into Harry's; he tried not to look into them. Close your mind. . . . Close your mind. . . . But he had never learned how to do it properly. . . .

"Do you know what I think, Potter?" said Snape, very quietly. "I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve detention with me every Saturday until the end of term. "What do you think, Potter?"

"I — I don't agree, sir," said Harry, still refusing to look into Snape's eyes.

"Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions," said Snape. "Ten o'clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office."

"But sir . . ." said Harry, looking up desperately. "Quidditch . . . the last match of the ..."

"Ten o'clock," whispered Snape, with a smile that showed his yellow teeth. "Poor Gryffindor. . . fourth place this year, I fear ..."

And he left the bathroom without another word, leaving Harry to stare into the cracked mirror, feeling sicker, he was sure, than Ron had ever felt in his life.

"I won't say 'I told you so,'" said Hermione, an hour later in the common room.

"Leave it, Hermione," said Ron angrily.

Harry had never made it to dinner; he had no appetite at all. He had just finished telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny what had happened, not that there seemed to have been much need. The news had traveled very fast: Apparently Moaning Myrtle had taken it upon herself to pop up in every bathroom in the castle to tell the story; Malfoy had already been visited in the hospital wing by Pansy Parkinson, who had lost no time in vilifying Harry far and wide, and Snape had told the staff precisely what had happened. Harry had already been called out of the common room to endure fifteen highly unpleasant minutes in the company of Professor McGonagall,

who had told him he was lucky not to have been expelled and that she supported wholeheartedly Snape's punishment of detention every Saturday until the end of term.

"I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person," Hermione said, evidently unable to stop herself. "And I was right, wasn't I."

"No, I don't think you were," said Harry stubbornly.

He was having a bad enough time without Hermione lecturing him; the looks on the Gryffindor team's faces when he had told them he would not be able to play on Saturday had been the worst punishment of all. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him now but did not meet them; he did not want to see disappointment or anger there. He had just told her that she would be playing Seeker on Saturday and that Dean would be rejoining the team as Chaser in her place. Perhaps, if they won, Ginny and Dean would make up during the post-match euphoria. . . . The thought went through Harry like an icy knife. . . .

"Harry," said Hermione, "how can you still stick up for that book when that spell —"

"Will you stop harping on about the book!" snapped Harry. "The Prince only copied it out! It's not like he was advising anyone to use it! For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!"

"I don't believe this," said Hermione. "You're actually defending—"

"I'm not defending what I did!" said Harry quickly. "I wish I ; hadn't done it, and not just because I've got about a dozen detentions. You know I wouldn't've used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can't blame the Prince, he hadn't written 'try this out, it's really good' — he was just making notes for himself, wasn't he, not for anyone else. . . ."

"Are you telling me," said Hermione, "that you're going to go back — ?"

"And get the book? Yeah, I am," said Harry forcefully. "Listen, without the Prince I'd never have won the Felix Felicis. I'd never have known how to save Ron from poisoning, I'd never have —"

"— got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don't deserve," said Hermione nastily.

"Give it a rest, Hermione!" said Ginny, and Harry was so amazed, so grateful, he looked up. "By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse, you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!"

"Well, of course I'm glad Harry wasn't cursed!" said Hermione, clearly stung. "But you can't call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it's landed him! And I'd have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match —"

"Oh, don't start acting as though you understand Quidditch," snapped Ginny, "you'll only embarrass yourself."

Harry and Ron stared: Hermione and Ginny, who had always got on together very well, were now sitting with their arms folded, glaring in opposite directions. Ron looked nervously at Harry, then snatched up a book at random and hid behind it. Harry, however,

little though he knew he deserved it, felt unbelievably cheerful all of a sudden, even though none of them spoke again for the rest of the evening.

His lightheartedness was short-lived. There were Slytherin taunts to be endured next day, not to mention much anger from fellow Gryffindors, who were most unhappy that their Captain had got himself banned from the final match of the season. By Saturday morning, whatever he might have told Hermione, Harry would have gladly exchanged all the Felix Felicis in the world to be walking down to the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Ginny, and the others. It was almost unbearable to turn away from the mass of students streaming out into the sunshine, all of them wearing rosettes and hats and brandishing banners and scarves, to descend the stone steps into the dungeons and walk until the distant sounds of the crowd were quite obliterated, knowing that he would not be able to hear a word of commentary or a cheer or groan.

"Ah, Potter," said Snape, when Harry had knocked on his door and entered the unpleasantly familiar office that Snape, despite teaching floors above now, had not vacated; it was as dimly lit as ever and the same slimy

dead objects were suspended in colored potions all around the walls. Ominously, there were many cob-webbed boxes piled on a table where Harry was clearly supposed to sit; they had an aura of tedious, hard, and pointless work about them.

"Mr. Filch has been looking for someone to clear out these old files," said Snape softly. "They are the records of other Hogwarts wrongdoers and their punishments. Where the ink has grown faint, or the cards have suffered damage from mice, we would like you to copy out the crimes and punishments afresh and, making sure that they are in alphabetical order, replace them in the boxes. You will not use magic."

"Right, Professor," said Harry, with as much contempt as he could put into the last three syllables.

"I thought you could start," said Snape, a malicious smile on his lips, "with boxes one thousand and twelve to one thousand and fifty-six. You will find some familiar names in there, which should add interest to the task. Here, you see . . ."

He pulled out a card from one of the topmost boxes with a flourish and read, "James Potter and Sirius Black. Apprehended using an illegal hex upon Bertram Aubrey. Aubreys head twice normal size. Double detention." Snape sneered. "It must be such a comforting thing that, though they are gone, a record of their great achievements remains."

Harry felt the familiar boiling sensation in the pit of his stomach. Biting his tongue to prevent himself retaliating, he sat down in front of the boxes and pulled one toward him.

It was, as Harry had anticipated, useless, boring work, punctuated (as Snape had clearly planned) with the regular jolt in the stomach that meant he had just read his father or Sirius's names, usually coupled together in various petty misdeeds, occasionally accompanied by those of Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. And while he copied out all their various offenses and punishments, he wondered what was going on outside, where the match would have just started . . . Ginny playing Seeker against Cho . . .

Harry glanced again and again at the large clock ticking on the wall. It seemed to be moving half as fast as a regular clock; perhaps Snape had bewitched it to go extra slowly? He could not have been here for only half an hour ... an hour ... an hour and a half. . . .

Harry's stomach started rumbling when the clock showed half past twelve. Snape, who had not spoken at all since setting Harry his task, finally looked up at ten past one.

"I think that will do," he said coldly. "Mark the place you have reached. You will continue at ten o'clock next Saturday." Yes, sir.

Harry stuffed a bent card into the box at random and hurried out of the door before Snape could change his mind, racing back up the stone steps,

straining his ears to hear a sound from the pitch, but all was quiet. ... It was over, then. . . .

He hesitated outside the crowded Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase; whether Gryffindor had won or lost, the team usually celebrated or commiserated in their own common room.

"Quid agis?" he said tentatively to the Fat Lady, wondering what he would find inside.

Her expression was unreadable as she replied, "You'll see."

And she swung forward.

A roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; several hands pulled him into the room.

"We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"

Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. And without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her.

After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart. The room had gone very quiet. Then several people wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling. Harry looked over the top of Ginny's head to see Dean Thomas holding a shattered glass in his hand, and Romilda Vane looking as though she might throw something. Hermione was beaming, but Harry's eyes sought Ron. At last he found him, still clutching the Cup and wearing an expression appropriate to having been clubbed over the head. For a fraction of a second they looked at each other, then Ron gave a tiny jerk of the head that Harry understood to mean, Well—if you must.

The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. A long walk in the grounds seemed indicated, during which — if they had time — they might discuss the match.

Chapter 25: The Seer Overheard

The fact that Harry Potter was going out with Ginny Weasley seemed to interest a great number of people, most of them girls, yet Harry found himself newly and happily impervious to gossip over the next few weeks. After all, it made a very nice change to be talked about because of something that was making him happier than he could remember being for a very long time, rather than because he had been involved in hor-rific scenes of Dark magic.

'You'd think people had better things to gossip about,' said Ginny, as she sat on the common-room floor, leaning against Harry's legs and reading the Daily Prophet. Three Dementor attacks in a week, and all Romilda Vane does is ask me if it's true you've got a Hippogriff tattooed across your chest.'

Ron and Hermione both roared with laughter. Harry ignored them.

'What did you tell her?'

' ? told her it's a Hungarian Horntail,' said Ginny, turning a page of the newspaper idly. 'Much more macho.'

Thanks,' said Harry, grinning. 'And what did you tell her Ron's got?'

'A Pygmy Puff, but I didn't say where.'

Ron scowled as Hermione rolled around laughing.

'Watch it,' he said, pointing wamingly at Harry and Ginny. 'Just because I've given my permission doesn't mean I can't withdraw it -'

"Tour permission",' scoffed Ginny. 'Since when did you give me permission to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you'd rather it was Harry than Michael or Dean.'

'Yeah, I would,' said Ron grudgingly. 'And just as long as you don't start snogging each other in public -'

'You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrash-ing around like a pair of eels all over the place?' demanded Ginny.

But Ron's tolerance was not to be tested much as they moved into June, for Harry and Ginny's time together was becoming increasingly restricted. Ginny's O.W.L.s were approaching and she was therefore forced to revise for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library and Harry was sitting beside the window in the common room, supposedly finishing his Herbology home-work but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had spent down by the lake with Ginny at lunch-time, Hermione dropped into the seat between him and Ron with an unpleasantly purposeful look on her face.

'I want to talk to you, Harry.'

'What about?' said Harry suspiciously. Only the previous day, Hermione had told him off for distracting Ginny when she ought to be working hard for her examinations.

The so-called Half-Blood Prince.'

'Oh, not again,' he groaned. 'Will you please drop it?'

He had not dared to return to the Room of Requirement to retrieve his book, and his performance in Potions was suffering accordingly (though Slughorn, who approved of Ginny, had jocularly attributed this to Harry being lovesick). But Harry was sure that Snape had not yet given up hope of laying hands on the Prince's book, and was determined to leave it where it was while Snape remained on the lookout.

'I'm not dropping it,' said Hermione firmly, 'until you've heard me out. Now, I've been trying to find out a bit about who might make a hobby of inventing Dark spells -'

'He didn't make a hobby of it -'

'He, he - who says it's a he?'

'We've been through this,' said Harry crossly. 'Prince, Hermione, Prince!'

'Right!' said Hermione, red patches blazing in her cheeks as she pulled a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket and slammed it down on the table in front of Harry. 'Look at that! Look at the picture!'

Harry picked up the crumbling piece of paper and stared at the moving photograph, yellowed with age; Ron leaned over for a look, too. The picture showed a skinny girl of around fifteen. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pallid face. Underneath the photograph was the caption: Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team.

'So?' said Harry, scanning the short news item to which the picture belonged; it was a rather dull story about inter-school competitions.

'Her name was Eileen Prince. Prince, Harry.'

They looked at each other and Harry realised what Hermione was trying to say. He burst out laughing.

'No way.'

'What?'

'You think she was the Half-Blood ...? Oh, come on.'

'Well, why not? Harry, there aren't any real princes in the wizarding world! It's either a nickname, a made-up title somebody's given themselves,

or it could be their actual name, couldn't it? No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizard

whose surname was "Prince", and her mother was a Muggle, then that would make her a "half-blood Prince"!

'Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione ...'

'But it would! Maybe she was proud of being half a Prince!'

'Listen, Hermione, I can tell it's not a girl. I can just tell.'

The truth is that you don't think a girl would have been clever enough,' said Hermione angrily.

'How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think girls are clever?' said Harry, stung by this. 'It's the way he writes. I just know the Prince was a bloke, I can tell. This girl hasn't got anything to do with it. Where did you get this, anyway?'

'The library,' said Hermione, predictably. 'There's a whole collection of old Prophets up there. Well, I'm going to find out more about Eileen Prince if I can.'

'Enjoy yourself,' said Harry irritably.

'I will,' said Hermione. 'And the first place I'll look,' she shot at him, as she reached the portrait hole, 'is records of old Potions awards!'

Harry scowled after her for a moment, then continued his contemplation of the darkening sky.

'She's just never got over you outperforming her in Potions,' said Ron, returning to his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.

'You don't think I'm mad, wanting that book back, do you?'

'Course not,' said Ron robustly. 'He was a genius, the Prince. Anyway ... without his bezoar tip ...' he drew his finger significantly across his own throat, 'I wouldn't be here to discuss it, would I? I mean, I'm not saying that spell you used on Malfoy was great -'

'Nor am I,' said Harry quickly.

'But he healed all right, didn't he? Back on his feet in no time.'

'Yeah,' said Harry; this was perfectly true, although his con-science squirmed slightly all the same. Thanks to Snape ...'

'You still got detention with Snape this Saturday?' Ron continued.

'Yeah, and the Saturday after that, and the Saturday after that,' sighed Harry. 'And he's hinting now that if I don't get all the boxes done by the end of term, we'll carry on next year.'

He was finding these detentions particularly irksome because they cut into the already limited time he could have been spending with Ginny. Indeed, he had frequently wondered lately whether Snape did not know this, for he was keeping Harry later and later every time, while making pointed asides about Harry having to miss the good weather and the varied opportunities it offered.

Harry was shaken from these bitter reflections by the appearance at his side of Jimmy Peakes, who was holding out a scroll of parchment.

'Thanks, Jimmy ... hey, it's from Dumbledore!' said Harry excitedly, unrolling the parchment and scanning it. 'He wants me to go to his office as quick as I can!'

They stared at each other.

'Blimey,' whispered Ron. 'You don't reckon ... he hasn't found ...?'

'Better go and see, hadn't I?' said Harry, jumping to his feet.

He hurried out of the common room and along the seventh floor as fast as he could, passing nobody but Peeves, who swooped past in the opposite direction, throwing bits of chalk at Harry in a routine sort of way and

cackling loudly as he dodged Harry's defensive jinx. Once Peeves had vanished, there was silence in the corridors; with only fifteen minutes left until curfew, most people had already returned to their common rooms.

And then Harry heard a scream and a crash. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

'How - dare - you - aaaaargh!'

The noise was coming from a corridor nearby; Harry sprinted towards it, his wand at the ready, hurtled round another corner and saw Professor Trelawney sprawled upon the floor, her head covered in one of her many shawls, several sherry bottles lying beside her, one broken.

'Professor -'

Harry hurried forwards and helped Professor Trelawney to her feet. Some of her glittering beads had become entangled with her glasses. She hiccupped loudly, patted her hair and pulled herself up on Harry's helping arm.

'What happened, Professor?'

'You may well ask!' she said shrilly. 'I was strolling along, brooding upon certain Dark portents I happen to have glimpsed ...'

But Harry was not paying much attention. He had just noticed where they were standing: there on the right was the tapestry of dancing trolls and, on the left, that smoothly impenetrable stretch of stone wall that concealed -

'Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?'

'... omens I have been vouchsafed - what?'

She looked suddenly shifty.

The Room of Requirement,' repeated Harry. 'Were you try-ing to get in there?'

'I - well - I didn't know students knew about -'

'Not all of them do,' said Harry. 'But what happened? You screamed ... it sounded as though you were hurt...'

'I - well,' said Professor Trelawney, drawing her shawls around her defensively and staring down at him with her vastly magnified eyes. 'I wished to - ah - deposit certain - um - personal items in the Room ...' And she muttered something about 'nasty accusations'.

'Right,' said Harry, glancing down at the sherry bottles. 'But you couldn't get in and hide them?'

He found this very odd; the Room had opened for him, after all, when he had wanted to hide the Half-Blood Prince's book.

'Oh, I got in all right,' said Professor Trelawney, glaring at the wall. 'But there was somebody already in there.'

'Somebody in -? Who?' demanded Harry. 'Who was in there?'

'I have no idea,' said Professor Trelawney, looking slightly taken aback at the urgency in Harry's voice. 'I walked into the Room and I heard a voice, which has never happened before in all my years of hiding - of using the Room, I mean.'

'A voice? Saying what?'

'I don't know that it was saying anything,' said Professor Trelawney. 'It was ... whooping.'

'Whooping?'

'Gleefully,' she said, nodding.

Harry stared at her.

'Was it male or female?'

'I would hazard a guess at male,' said Professor Trelawney.

'And it sounded happy?'

'Very happy,' said Professor Trelawney sniffily.

'As though it was celebrating?'

'Most definitely.'

'And then -?'

'And then I called out, "Who's there?"'

'You couldn't have found out who it was without asking?' Harry asked her, slightly frustrated.

'The Inner Eye,' said Professor Trelawney with dignity, straightening her shawls and many strands of glittering beads, 'was fixed upon matters well outside the mundane realms of whooping voices.'

'Right,' said Harry hastily; he had heard about Professor Trelawney's Inner Eye all too often before. 'And did the voice say who was there?'

'No, it did not,' she said. 'Everything went pitch black and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the Room!'

'And you didn't see that coming?' said Harry, unable to help himself.

'No, I did not, as I say, it was pitch -' She stopped and glared at him suspiciously.

'I think you'd better tell Professor Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'He ought to know Malfoy's celebrating - I mean, that some-one threw you out of the Room.'

To his surprise, Professor Trelawney drew herself up at this suggestion, looking haughty.

The Headmaster has intimated that he would prefer fewer visits from me,' she said coldly. I am not one to press my company upon those who do not value it. If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show -'

Her bony hand closed suddenly around Harry's wrist.

'Again and again, no matter how I lay them out -'

And she pulled a card dramatically from underneath her shawls.

'- the lightning-struck tower,' she whispered. 'Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time ...'

'Right,' said Harry again. 'Well ... I still think you should tell Dumbledore about this voice and everything going dark and being thrown out of the Room ...'

'You think so?' Professor Trelawney seemed to consider the matter for a moment, but Harry could tell that she liked the idea of retelling her little adventure.

'I'm going to see him right now,' said Harry. 'I've got a meeting with him. We could go together.'

'Oh, well, in that case,' said Professor Trelawney with a smile. She bent down, scooped up her sherry bottles and dumped them unceremoniously in a large blue and white vase standing in a nearby niche.

'I miss having you in my classes, Harry,' she said soulfully, as they set off together. 'You were never much of a Seer ... but you were a wonderful Object...'

Harry did not reply; he had loathed being the Object of Professor Trelawney's continual predictions of doom.

'I am afraid,' she went on, 'that the nag - I'm sorry, the centaur - knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him - one Seer to another - had he not, too, sensed the distant vibrations of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, comical!'

Her voice rose rather hysterically and Harry caught a powerful whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind.

'Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother's gift. Those rumours have been bandied about by the jealous for years. You know what I say to such people, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?'

Harry mumbled something indistinct.

'I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore,' went on Professor Trelawney, in throaty tones. 'He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed ... I was staying at the Hog's Head, which I do not advise, incidentally - bed bugs, dear boy - but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the courtesy of calling upon me in my room at the inn. He questioned me ... I must confess that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed towards Divination ... and I remember I was starting to feel a little odd, I had not eaten much that day ... but then ...'

And now Harry was paying attention properly for the first time, for he knew what had happened then: Professor Trelawney had made the prophecy that had altered the course of his whole life, the prophecy about him and Voldemort.

'... but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!'

'What?'

'Yes, there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing with Snape, who was waffling about having come the wrong way up the stairs, although I'm afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with Dumbledore - you see, he himself was seeking a job at the time, and no doubt hoped to pick up tips! Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more dis-posed to give me a job, and I could not help thinking, Harry, that it was because he appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting young man who was prepared to listen at keyholes - Harry, dear?'

She looked back over her shoulder, having only just real-ised that Harry was no longer with her; he had stopped walking and they were now ten feet from each other.

'Harry?' she repeated uncertainly.

Perhaps his face was white, to make her look so concerned and frightened. Harry was standing stock-still as waves of shock crashed over him, wave after wave, obliterating every-thing except the information that had been kept from him for so long ...

It was Snape who had overheard the prophecy. It was Snape who had carried the news of the prophecy to Voldemort. Snape and Peter Pettigrew together had sent Voldemort hunt-ing after Lily and James and their son ...

Nothing else mattered to Harry just now.

'Harry?' said Professor Trelawney again. 'Harry - I thought we were going to see the Headmaster together?'

'You stay here,' said Harry through numb lips.

'But, dear ... I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of-'

'You stay here!' Harry repeated angrily.

She looked alarmed as he ran past her, round the corner into Dumbledore's corridor, where the lone gargoyle stood sentry. Harry shouted the password at the gargoyle and ran up the moving spiral staircase three steps at a time. He did not knock upon Dumbledore's door, he hammered; and the calm voice answered 'Enter' after Harry had already flung himself into the room.

Fawkes the phoenix looked round, his bright black eyes gleaming with reflected gold from the sunset beyond the window. Dumbledore was standing at the window looking out at the grounds, a long, black travelling cloak in his arms.

'Well, Harry, I promised that you could come with me.'

For a moment or two, Harry did not understand; the conversation with Trelawney had driven everything else out of his head and his brain seemed to be moving very slowly.

'Come ... with you ... ?'

'Only if you wish it, of course.'

'If I...'

And then Harry remembered why he had been eager to come to Dumbledore's office in the first place.

'You've found one? You've found a Horcrux?'

'I believe so.'

Rage and resentment fought shock and excitement: for several moments, Harry could not speak.

'It is natural to be afraid,' said Dumbledore.

'I'm not scared!' said Harry at once, and it was perfectly

true; fear was one emotion he was not feeling at all. 'Which Horcrux is it? Where is it?'

'I am not sure which it is - though I think we can rule out the snake - but I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast many miles from here, a cave I have been trying to locate for a very long time: the cave in which Tom Riddle once terror-ised two children from his orphanage on their annual trip; you remember?'

'Yes,' said Harry. 'How is it protected?'

'I do not know; I have suspicions that may be entirely wrong.' Dumbledore hesitated, then said, 'Harry, I promised you that you could come with me, and I stand by that promise, but it would be very wrong of me not to warn you that this will be exceedingly dangerous.'

'I'm coming,' said Harry, almost before Dumbledore had finished speaking. Boiling with anger at Snape, his desire to do something desperate and risky had increased tenfold in the last few minutes. This seemed to show on Harry's face, for Dumbledore moved away from the window, and looked more closely at Harry, a slight crease between his silver eyebrows.

'What has happened to you?'

'Nothing,' lied Harry promptly.

'What has upset you?'

'I'm not upset.'

'Harry, you were never a good Occlumens -'

The word was the spark that ignited Harry's fury.

'Snape!' he said, very loudly, and Fawkes gave a soft squawk behind them. 'Snape's what's happened! He told Voldemort about the prophecy, it was him, he listened outside the door, Trelawney told me!'

Dumbledore's expression did not change, but Harry thought his face whitened under the bloody tinge cast by the setting sun. For a long moment, Dumbledore said nothing.

'When did you find out about this?' he asked at last.

'Just now!' said Many, who was refraining from yelling with enormous difficulty. And then, suddenly, he could not stop himself. 'AND YOU LET HIM TEACH HERE AND HE TOLD VOLDEMORT TO GO AFTER MY MUM AND DAD!'

Breathing hard as though he were fighting, Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who still had not moved a muscle, and paced up and down the study, rubbing his knuckles in his hand and exercising every last bit of restraint to prevent himself knocking things over. He wanted to rage and storm at Dumbledore, but he also wanted to go with him to try and destroy

the Horcrux; he wanted to tell him that he was a fool-ish old man for trusting Snape, but he was terrified that Dumbledore would not take him along unless he mastered his anger ...

'Harry,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'Please listen to me.'

It was as difficult to stop his relentless pacing as to refrain from shouting. Harry paused, biting his lip, and looked into Dumbledore's lined face.

'Professor Snape made a terrible -'

'Don't tell me it was a mistake, sir, he was listening at the door!'

'Please let me finish.' Dumbledore waited until Harry had nodded curtly, then went on. 'Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy. Naturally, he hastened to tell his master what he had heard, for it concerned his master most deeply. But he did not know - he had no possible way of knowing - which boy Voldemort would hunt from then onwards, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father -'

Harry let out a yell of mirthless laughter.

'He hated my dad like he hated Sirius! Haven't you noticed, Professor, how the people Snape hates tend to end up dead?'

'You have no idea of the remorse Professor Snape felt when he realised how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Harry. I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned -'

'But he's a very good Occlumens, isn't he, sir?' said Harry, whose voice was shaking with the effort of keeping it steady. 'And isn't Voldemort convinced that Snape's on his side, even now? Professor ... how can you be sure Snape's on our side?'

Dumbledore did not speak for a moment; he looked as though he was trying to make up his mind about something. At last he said, 'I am sure. I trust Severus Snape completely.'

Harry breathed deeply for a few moments in an effort to steady himself. It did not work.

'Well, I don't!' he said, as loudly as before. 'He's up to something with Draco Malfoy right now, right under your nose, and you still -'

'We have discussed this, Harry,' said Dumbledore, and now he sounded stern again. 'I have told you my views.'

'You're leaving the school tonight and I'll bet you haven't even considered that Snape and Malfoy might decide to -'

To what?' asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows raised. 'What is it that you suspect them of doing, precisely?'

'I ... they're up to something!' said Harry and his hands curled into fists as he said it. 'Professor Trelawney was just in the Room of Requirement, trying to hide her sherry bottles, and she heard Malfoy whooping, celebrating! He's trying to mend something dangerous in there and if you ask me he's fixed it at last and you're about to just walk out of school * without -'

'Enough,' said Dumbledore. He said it quite calmly, and yet Harry fell silent at once; he knew that he had finally crossed some invisible line. 'Do you think that I have once left the school unprotected during my absences this year? I have not. Tonight, when I leave, there will again be additional protection in place. Please do not suggest that I do not take the safety of my students seriously, Harry.'

'I didn't -' mumbled Harry, a little abashed, but Dumbledore cut across him.

'? do not wish to discuss the matter any further.'

Harry bit back his retort, scared that he had gone too far, that he had ruined his chance of accompanying Dumbledore, but Dumbledore went on, 'Do you wish to come with me tonight?'

'Yes,' said Harry at once.

'Very well, then: listen.'

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height.

'I take you with me on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question.'

'Of course.'

'Be sure to understand me, Harry. I mean that you must follow even such orders as "run", "hide" or "go back". Do I have your word?'

'I - yes, of course.'

'If I tell you to hide, you will do so?'

'Yes.'

'If I tell you to flee, you will obey?'

'Yes.'

'If I tell you to leave me, and save yourself, you will do as I tell you?'

'I -'

'Harry?'

They looked at each other for a moment.

'Yes, sir.'

'Very good. Then I wish you to go and fetch your Cloak and meet me in the Entrance Hall in five minutes' time.'

Dumbledore turned back to look out of the fiery window; the sun was now a ruby-red glare along the horizon. Harry walked quickly from the office and down the spiral staircase. His mind was oddly clear all of a sudden. He knew what to do.

Ron and Hermione were sitting together in the common room when he came back. 'What does Dumbledore want?' Hermione said at once. 'Harry, are you OK?' she added anxiously.

'I'm fine,' said Harry shortly, racing past them. He dashed up the stairs and into his dormitory, where he flung open his trunk and pulled out the Marauder's Map and a pair of balled-up socks. Then he sped back down the stairs and into the common room, skidding to a halt where Ron and Hermione sat, looking stunned.

'I haven't got much time,' Harry panted, 'Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen ...'

Quickly he told them where he was going, and why. He did not pause either for Hermione's gasps of horror or for Ron's hasty questions; they could work out the finer details for themselves later.

'... so you see what this means?' Harry finished at a gallop. 'Dumbledore won't be here tonight, so Malfoy's going to have another clear shot at whatever he's up to. No, listen to me!" he hissed angrily, as both Ron and Hermione showed every sign of interrupting. 'I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here -' He shoved the Marauder's Map into Hermione's hand. 'You've got to watch him and you've got to watch Snape, too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the DA. Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, he'll know what Dumbledore's protection is, and how to avoid it - but he won't be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?'

'Harry -' began Hermione, her eyes huge with fear.

'? haven't got time to argue,' said Harry curtly. Take this as well -' He thrust the socks into Ron's hands.

'Thanks,' said Ron. 'Er - why do I need socks?'

'You need what's wrapped in them, it's the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say goodbye to her from me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting -'

'No!' said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. 'We don't want it, you take it, who knows what you're going to be facing?'

'I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'I want to know you lot are OK ... don't look like that, Hermione, I'll see you later

And he was off, hurrying back through the portrait hole towards the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore was waiting beside the oaken front doors. He turned as Harry came skidding out on to the topmost stone step, panting hard, a searing stitch in his side.

'I would like you to wear your Cloak, please,' said Dumbledore, and he waited until Harry had thrown it on before saying, 'Very good. Shall we go?'

Dumbledore set off at once down the stone steps, his own travelling cloak barely stirring in the still summer air. Harry hurried alongside him under the Invisibility Cloak, still pant-ing and sweating rather a lot.

'But what will people think when they see you leaving, Professor?' Harry asked, his mind on Malfoy and Snape.

'That I am off into Hogsmeade for a drink,' said Dumbledore lightly. 'I sometimes offer Rosmerta my custom, or else visit the Hog's Head ... or I appear to. It is as good a way as any of disguising one's true destination.'

They made their way down the drive in the gathering twi-light. The air was full of the smells of warm grass, lake water and wood smoke from

Hagrid's cabin. It was difficult to believe that they were heading for anything dangerous or frightening.

'Professor,' said Harry quietly, as the gates at the bottom of the drive came into view, 'will we be Apparating?'

'Yes,' said Dumbledore. 'You can Apparate now, I believe?'

'Yes,' said Harry, 'but I haven't got a licence.'

He felt it best to be honest; what if he spoiled everything by turning up a hundred miles from where he was supposed to go?

'No matter,' said Dumbledore, 'I can assist you again.'

They turned out of the gates into the twilit, deserted lane to Hogsmeade. Darkness descended fast as they walked and by the time they reached the High Street night was falling in earnest. Lights twinkled from windows over shops and as they neared the Three Broomsticks they heard raucous shouting.

'- and stay out!' shouted Madam Rosmerta, forcibly ejecting a grubby-looking wizard. 'Oh, hello, Albus ... you're out late ...'

'Good evening, Rosmerta, good evening ... forgive me, I'm off to the Hog's Head ... no offence, but I feel like a quieter atmosphere tonight...'

A minute later they turned the corner into the side street where the Hog's Head's sign creaked a little, though there was no breeze. In contrast to the Three Broomsticks, the pub appeared to be completely empty.

'It will not be necessary for us to enter,' muttered Dumbledore, glancing around. 'As long as nobody sees us go ... now place your hand upon my arm, Harry. There is no need to grip too hard, I am merely guiding you. On the count of three - one ... two ... three ...'

Harry turned. At once, there was that horrible sensation that he was being squeezed through a thick rubber tube; he could not draw breath, every part of him was being compressed almost past endurance and then, just when he thought he must suffocate, the invisible bands seemed to burst open, and he was standing in cool darkness, breathing in lungfuls of fresh, salty air.

Chapter 26: The Cave

Harry could smell salt and hear rushing waves; a light, chilly breeze ruffled his hair as he looked out at moon-lit sea and star-strewn sky. He was standing upon a high outcrop of dark rock, water foaming and churning below him. He glanced over his shoulder. A towering cliff stood behind them, a sheer drop, black and faceless. A few large chunks of rock, such as the one upon which Harry and Dumbledore were standing, looked as though they had broken away from the cliff face at some point in the past. It was a bleak, harsh view, the sea and the rock unrelieved by any tree or sweep of grass or sand.

"What do you think?" asked Dumbledore. He might have been asking Harry's opinion on whether it was a good site for a picnic.

"They brought the kids from the orphanage here?" asked Harry, who could not imagine a less cozy spot for a day trip.

"Not here, precisely," said Dumbledore. "There is a village of sorts about halfway along the cliffs behind us. I believe the orphans were taken there for a little sea air and a view of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could reach this rock unless they were uncommonly good mountaineers, and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down; magic would have served better than ropes. And he brought two small children with him, probably for the

pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don't you?"

Harry looked up at the cliff again and felt goose bumps.

"But his final destination — and ours — lies a little farther on. Come."

Dumbledore beckoned Harry to the very edge of the rock where a series of jagged niches made footholds leading down to boulders that lay half-submerged in water and closer to the cliff. It was a treacherous descent and Dumbledore, hampered slightly by his withered hand, moved slowly. The lower rocks were slippery with seawater. Harry could feel flecks of cold salt spray hitting his face. "Lumos," said Dumbledore, as he reached the boulder closest to the cliff face. A thousand flecks of golden light sparkled upon the dark surface of the water a few feet below where he crouched; the black wall of rock beside him was illuminated too. "You see?" said Dumbledore quietly, holding his wand a little higher. Harry saw a fissure in the cliff into which dark water was swirling. "You will not object to getting a little wet?"

"No," said Harry.

"Then take off your Invisibility Cloak — there is no need for it now — and let us take the plunge," And with the sudden agility of a much younger man, Dumble-dore slid from the boulder, landed in the sea, and began to swim, with a perfect breaststroke, toward the dark slit in the rock face, his lit wand held in his teeth. Harry pulled off his cloak, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed. The water was icy; Harry's waterlogged clothes billowed

around him and weighed him down. Taking deep breaths that filled his nostrils with the tang of salt and seaweed, he struck out for the shimmering, shrinking light now moving deeper into the cliff. The fissure soon opened into a dark tunnel that Harry could tell would be filled with water at high tide. The slimy walls were barely three feet apart and glimmered like wet tar in the passing light of Dumbledore's wand. A little way in, the passageway curved to the left, and Harry saw that it extended far into the cliff. He continued to swim in Dumbledore's wake, the tips of his benumbed fingers brushing the rough, wet rock.

Then he saw Dumbledore rising out of the water ahead, his sil-ver hair and dark robes gleaming. When Harry reached the spot he found steps that led into a large cave. He clambered up them, water streaming from his soaking clothes, and emerged, shivering uncontrollably, into the still and freezing air.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the cave, his wand held high as he turned slowly on the spot, examining the walls and ceiling.

"Yes, this is the place," said Dumbledore.

"How can you tell?" Harry spoke in a whisper.

"It has known magic," said Dumbledore simply. Harry could not tell whether the shivers he was experiencing were due to his spine-deep coldness or to the same awareness of

enchancements. He watched as Dumbledore continued to revolve on the spot, evidently concentrating on things Harry could not see. "This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall," said Dumbledore after a moment or two. "We need to penetrate the inner place. . . . Now it is Lord Voldemort's obstacles that stand in our way, rather than those nature made. . . ."

Dumbledore approached the wall of the cave and caressed it with his blackened fingertips, murmuring words in a strange tongue that Harry did not understand. Twice Dumbledore walked right around the cave, touching as much of the rough rock as he could, occasionally pausing, running his fingers backward and for-ward over a particular spot, until finally he stopped, his hand pressed flat against the wall. "Here," he said. "We go on through here. The entrance is concealed." Harry did not ask how Dumbledore knew. He had never seen a wizard work things out like this, simply by looking and touching; but Harry had long since learned that bangs and smoke were more often the marks of ineptitude than expertise. Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack.

"You've d-done it!" said Harry through chattering teeth, but before the words had left his lips the outline had gone, leaving the rock as bare and solid as ever. Dumbledore looked around.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I forgot," he said; he now pointed his wand at Harry and at once, Harry's clothes were as warm and dry as if they had been hanging in front of a blazing fire.

"Thank you," said Harry gratefully, but Dumbledore had already turned his attention back to the solid cave wall. He did not try any more magic, but simply stood there staring at it intently, as though something extremely interesting was written on it. Harry stayed quite still; he did not want to break Dumbledores concentration. Then, after two solid minutes, Dumbledore said quietly, "Oh, surely not. So crude."

"What is it, Professor?"

"I rather think," said Dumbledore, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the kind Harry used to chop potion ingredients, "that we are required to make payment to pass."

"Payment?" said Harry. "You've got to give the door something?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Blood, if I am not much mistaken."

"Blood?"

"I said it was crude," said Dumbledore, who sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen short of higher standards Dumbledore expected. "The idea, as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury."

"Yeah, but still, if you can avoid it . . ." said Harry, who had experienced enough pain not to be keen for more.

"Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable," said Dumbledore, shaking back the sleeve of his robes and exposing the forearm of his injured hand.

"Professor!" protested Harry, hurrying forward as Dumbledore raised his knife. "I'll do it, I'm —" He did not know what he was going to say — younger, fitter?

But Dumbledore merely smiled. There was a flash of silver, and a spurt of scarlet; the rock face was peppered with dark, glistening drops.

"You are very kind, Harry," said Dumbledore, now passing the tip of his wand over the deep cut he had made in his own arm, so that it healed instantly, just as Snape had healed Malfoy's wound, "But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn't it?" The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness. "After me, I think," said Dumbledore, and he walked through the archway with Harry on his heels, lighting his own wand hastily as he went.

An eerie sight met their eyes: They were standing on the edge of a great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make out the distant banks, in a cavern so high that the ceiling too was out of sight. A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected

in the completely still water below. The greenish glow and the light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, though their rays did not penetrate as far as Harry would have expected. The dark-ness was somehow denser than normal darkness.

"Let us walk," said Dumbledore quietly. "Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me." He set off around the edge of the lake, and Harry followed close behind him. Their footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the narrow rim of rock that surrounded the water. On and on they walked, but the view did not vary: on one side of them, the rough cavern wall, on the other, the boundless expanse of smooth, glassy blackness, in the very middle of which was that mysterious greenish glow. Harry found the place and the silence oppressive, unnerving.

"Professor?" he said finally. "Do you think the Horcrux is here?"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore. "Yes, I'm sure it is. The question is, how do we get to it?"

"We couldn't... we couldn't just try a Summoning Charm?" Harry said, sure that it was a stupid suggestion. But he was much keener than he was prepared to admit on getting out of this place as soon as possible.

"Certainly we could," said Dumbledore, stopping so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. "Why don't you do it?"

"Me? Oh . . . okay . . ." Harry had not expected this, but cleared his throat and said loudly, wand aloft, "Accio Horcrux!"

With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Harry could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backward in shock and hit the wall; his heart was still thundering as he turned to Dumbledore.

"What was that?"

"Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux."

Harry looked back at the water. The surface of the lake was once more shining black glass: The ripples had vanished unnaturally fast; Harry's heart, however, was still pounding.

"Did you think that would happen, sir?"

"I thought something would happen if we made an obvious attempt to get our hands on the Horcrux. That was a very good idea, Harry; much the simplest way of finding out what we are facing."

"But we don't know what the thing was," said Harry, looking at the sinisterly smooth water.

"What the things are, you mean," said Dumbledore. "I doubt very much that there is only one of them. Shall we walk on?"

"Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you think we're going to have to go into the lake?"

"Into it? Only if we are very unfortunate."

"You don't think the Horcrux is at the bottom?"

"Oh no ... I think the Horcrux is in the middle." And Dumbledore pointed toward the misty green light in the center of the lake.

"So we're going to have to cross the lake to get to it?"

"Yes, I think so." Harry did not say anything. His thoughts were all of water mon-sters, of giant serpents, of demons, kelpies, and sprites. . . .

"Aha," said Dumbledore, and he stopped again; this time, Harry really did walk into him; for a moment he toppled on the edge of the dark water, and Dumbledore's uninjured hand closed tightly around his upper arm, pulling him back. "So sorry, Harry, I should have given warning. Stand back against the wall, please; I think I have found the place."

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore meant; this patch of dark bank was exactly like every other bit as far as he could tell, but Dumbledore seemed to have detected something special about it. This time he was running his hand, not over the rocky wall, but through the thin air, as though expecting to find and grip something invisible.

"Oho," said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something Harry could not see. Dumbledore moved closer to the water; Harry watched nervously as the tips of Dumbledore's buckled shoes found the utmost edge of the rock rim. Keeping his hand clenched in midair, Dumbledore raised his wand with the other and tapped his fist with the point.

Immediately a thick coppery green chain appeared out of thin air, extending from the depths of the water into Dumbledore's clenched hand. Dumbledore tapped the chain, which began to slide through his fist like a snake, coiling itself on the ground with a clinking sound that echoed noisily off the rocky walls, pulling something from the depths of the black water. Harry gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface, glowing as green as the chain, and floated, with barely a ripple, toward the place on the bank where Harry and Dumbledore stood.

"How did you know that was there?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"Magic always leaves traces," said Dumbledore, as the boat hit the bank with a gentle bump, "sometimes very distinctive traces. I taught Tom Riddle. I know his style."

"Is ... is this boat safe?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux."

"So the things in the water won't do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort's boat?"

"I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, however, we have done well. They have allowed us to raise the boat."

"But why have they let us?" asked Harry, who could not shake off the vision of tentacles rising out of the dark water the moment they were out of sight of the bank.

"Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the boat," said Dumbledore. "I think he would have been prepared to risk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would find it, knowing that he had set other obstacles ahead that only he would be able to penetrate. We shall see whether he was right."

Harry looked down into the boat. It really was very small. "It doesn't look like it was built for two people. Will it hold both of us? Will we be too heavy together?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Voldemort will not have cared about the weight, but about the amount of magical power that crossed his lake. I rather think an enchantment will have been placed upon this boat so that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it."

"But then — ?"

"I do not think you will count, Harry: You are underage and un-qualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixteen-year-old to reach this place: I think it unlikely that your powers will register compared to mine." These words did nothing to raise Harry's morale; perhaps Dumbledore knew it, for he added, "Voldemort's mistake, Harry, Voldemort's mistake. . . Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth. . . . Now, you first this time, and be careful not to touch the water." Dumbledore stood aside and Harry climbed carefully into the boat. Dumbledore stepped in too, coiling the chain onto the floor. They were crammed in together; Harry could not comfortably sit, but crouched, his knees jutting over the edge of the boat, which began to move at once. There was no sound other than the silken rustle of the boat's prow cleaving the water; it moved without their help, as though an invisible rope was pulling it onward toward the light in the center. Soon they could no longer see the walls of the cavern; they might have been at sea except that there were no waves.

Harry looked down and saw the reflected gold of his wandlight sparkling and glittering on the black water as they passed. The boat was carving deep ripples upon the glassy surface, grooves in the dark mirror. . . .

And then Harry saw it, marble white, floating inches below the surface. "Professor!" he said, and his startled voice echoed loudly over the silent water.

"Harry?"

"I think I saw a hand in the water — a human hand!"

"Yes, I am sure you did," said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat.

"So that thing that jumped out of the water — ?" But Harry had his answer before Dumbledore could reply; the wandlight had slid over a fresh patch of water and showed him, this time, a dead man lying faceup inches beneath the surface, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke. "There are bodies in here!" said Harry, and his voice sounded much higher than usual and most unlike his own.

"Yes," said Dumbledore placidly, "but we do not need to worry about them at the moment."

"At the moment?" Harry repeated, tearing his gaze from the water to look at Dumbledore.

"Not while they are merely drifting peacefully below us," said Dumbledore. "There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more." Harry said nothing; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea that there were bodies floating around them and beneath them horrible and, what was more, he did not believe that they were not dangerous.

"But one of them jumped," he said, trying to make his voice as level and calm as Dumbledore's. "When I tried to Summon the Horcrux, a body leapt out of the lake."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry," Dumbledore added with a smile, in response to Harry's bewildered expression.

"Oh . . . right. . ." said Harry quickly. He turned his head to look at the greenish glow toward which the boat was still inexorably sailing. He could not pretend now that he was not scared. The great black lake, teeming with

the dead ... It seemed hours and hours ago that he had met Professor Trelawney, that he had given Ron and Hermione Felix Felicis. . . . He suddenly wished he had said a better good-bye to them . . . and he hadn't seen Ginny at all. . .

"Nearly there," said Dumbledore cheerfully. Sure enough, the greenish light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat had come to a halt, bumping gently into something that Harry could not see at first, but when he raised his illuminated wand he saw that they had reached a small island of smooth rock in the center of the lake. "Careful not to touch the water," said Dumbledore again as Harry climbed out of the boat.

The island was no larger than Dumbledore's office, an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of that greenish light, which looked much brighter when viewed close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a stone basin rather like the Pensieve, which was set on top of a pedestal. Dumbledore approached the basin and Harry followed. Side by side, they looked down into it. The basin was full of an emerald liquid emitting that phosphorescent glow.

"What is it?" asked Harry quietly.

"I am not sure," said Dumbledore. "Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however." Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of his robe over his blackened hand, and stretched out the tips of his burned fingers toward the surface of the potion.

"Sir, no, don't touch — !"

"I cannot touch," said Dumbledore, smiling faintly. "See? I cannot approach any nearer than this. You try."

Staring, Harry put his hand into the basin and attempted to touch the potion. He met an invisible barrier that prevented him coming within an inch of it. No matter how hard he pushed, his fingers encountered nothing but what seemed to be solid and flexible air.

"Out of the way, please, Harry," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand and made complicated movements over the surface of the-potion, murmuring soundlessly. Nothing happened, except per haps that the potion glowed a little brighter. Harry remained silent while Dumbledore worked, but after a while Dumbledore with-drew his wand, and Harry felt it was safe to talk again.

"You think the Horcrux is in there, sir?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore peered more closely into the basin. Harry saw his face reflected, upside down, in the smooth surface of the green potion. "But how to reach it? This potion cannot be pen-etrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature." Almost absentmindedly, Dumbledore raised his wand again, twirled it once in midair, and then

caught the crystal goblet that he had conjured out of nowhere. "I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk."

"What?" said Harry. "No!"

"Yes, I think so: Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what lies in its depths."

"But what if— what if it kills you?"

"Oh, I doubt that it would work like that," said Dumbledore easily. "Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who reached this island." Harry couldn't believe it. Was this more of Dumbledore's insane determination to see good in everyone?

"Sir," said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable, "sir, this is Voldemort we're —"

"I'm sorry, Harry; I should have said, he would not want to immediately kill the person who reached this island," Dumbledore corrected himself. "He would want to keep them alive long enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his defenses and, most importantly of all, why they were so intent upon emptying the basin. Do not forget that Lord Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes."

Harry made to speak again, but this time Dumbledore raised his hand for silence, frowning slightly at the emerald liquid, evidently thinking hard.

"Undoubtedly," he said, finally, "this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, cause me to forget what I am here for, create so much pain I am dis-tracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Harry, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. You understand?"

Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he had been invited along — so that he could force-feed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

"You remember," said Dumbledore, "the condition on which I brought you with me?"

Harry hesitated, looking into the blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin.

"But what if—?"

"You swore, did you not, to follow any command I gave you?"

"Yes, but—"

"I warned you, did I not, that there might be danger?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Well, then," said Dumbledore, shaking back his sleeves once more and raising the empty goblet, "you have my orders."

"Why can't I drink the potion instead?" asked Harry desperately.

"Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable," said Dumbledore. "Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?"

"Couldn't — ?"

"Do I have it?"

"But—"

"Your word, Harry."

"I —all right, but—"

Before Harry could make any further protest, Dumbledore lowered the crystal goblet into the potion. For a split second, Harry hoped that he would not be able to touch the potion with the goblet, but the crystal sank into the surface as nothing else had; when the glass was full to the brim, Dumbledore lifted it to his mouth. "Your good health, Harry."

And he drained the goblet. Harry watched, terrified, his hands gripping the rim of the basin so hard that his fingertips were numb.

"Professor?" he said anxiously, as Dumbledore lowered the empty glass. "How do you feel?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes closed. Harry wondered whether he was in pain. Dumbledore plunged the glass blindly back into the basin, refilled it, and drank once more.

In silence, Dumbledore drank three gobletsful of the potion. Then, halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell forward against the basin. His eyes were still closed, his breathing heavy.

"Professor Dumbledore?" said Harry, his voice strained. "Can you hear me?"

Dumbledore did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. His grip on the goblet was slackening; the potion was about to spill from it. Harry reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady. "Professor, can you hear me?" he repeated loudly, his voice echo-ing around the cavern.

Dumbledore panted and then spoke in a voice Harry did not recognize, for he had never heard Dumbledore frightened like this.

"I don't want. . . Don't make me ..."

Harry stared into the whitened face he knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and did not know what to do.

". . . don't like . . . want to stop . . ." moaned Dumbledore.

"You . . . you can't stop, Professor," said Harry. "You've got to keep drinking, remember? You told me you had to keep drinking. Here . . ." Hating himself, repulsed by what he was doing, Harry forced the goblet back toward Dumbledore's mouth and tipped it, so that Dumbledore drank the remainder of the potion inside.

"No ..." he groaned, as Harry lowered the goblet back into the basin and refilled it for him. "I don't want to. ... I don't want to. . . . Let me go. . . ."

"Its all right, Professor," said Harry, his hand shaking. "Its all right, I'm here —"

"Make it stop, make it stop," moaned Dumbledore.

"Yes.. . yes, this'll make it stop," lied Harry. He tipped the contents of the goblet into Dumbledore's open mouth. Dumbledore screamed; the noise echoed all around the vast chamber, across the dead black water.

"No, no, no, no, I can't, I can't, don't make me, I don't want to. . . ."

"It's all right, Professor, it's all right!" said Harry loudly, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly scoop up the sixth goblet full of potion; the basin was now half empty. "Nothing's happening to you, you're safe, it isn't real, I swear it isn't real — take this, now, take this..." And obediently, Dumbledore drank, as though it was an anti-dote Harry offered him, but upon draining the goblet, he sank to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

"It's all my fault, all my fault," he sobbed. "Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I'll never, never again ..."

"This will make it stop, Professor," Harry said, his voice crackling as he tipped the seventh glass of potion into Dumbledore's mouth.

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers surrounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refilled goblet from Harry's trembling hands as he moaned, "Don't hurt them, don't hurt them, please, please, it's my fault, hurt me instead ..."

"Here, drink this, drink this, you'll be all right," said Harry desperately, and once again Dumbledore obeyed him, opening his mouth even as he kept his eyes tight shut and shook from head to foot. And now he fell forward, screaming again, hammering his fists upon the ground, while Harry filled the ninth goblet.

"Please, please, please, no ... not that, not that, I'll do anything ..."

"Just drink, Professor, just drink . . ."

Dumbledore drank like a child dying of thirst, but when he had finished, he yelled again as though his insides were on fire. "No more, please, no more ..."

Harry scooped up a tenth gobletful of potion and felt the crystal scrape the bottom of the basin. "We're nearly there, Professor. Drink this, drink it. ..."

He supported Dumbledore's shoulders and again, Dumbledore drained the glass; then Harry was on his feet once more, refilling the goblet as Dumbledore began to scream in more anguish than ever, "I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!"

"Drink this, Professor. Drink this. . . ."

Dumbledore drank, and no sooner had he finished than he yelled, "KILL ME!"

"This — this one will!" gasped Harry. "Just drink this .. . It'll be over ... all over!" Dumbledore gulped at the goblet, drained every last drop, and then, with a great, rattling gasp, rolled over onto his face.

"No!" shouted Harry, who had stood to refill the goblet again; instead he dropped the cup into the basin, flung himself down beside Dumbledore, and heaved him over onto his back; Dumbledore's glasses were askew, his mouth agape, his eyes closed. "No." said Harry, shaking Dumbledore, "no, you're not dead, you said it wasn't poison, wake up, wake up — Rennervate!" he

cried, his wand pointing at Dumbledores chest; there was a flash of red light but nothing happened. "Rennervate — sir — please —"

Dumbledores eyelids flickered; Harry's heart leapt, "Sir, are you — ?"

"Water," croaked Dumbledore.

"Water," panted Harry. "Yes —" He leapt to his feet and seized the goblet he had dropped in the basin; he barely registered the golden locket lying curled beneath it.

"Aguamenti!" he shouted, jabbing the goblet with his wand. The goblet filled with clear water; Harry dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, raised his head, and brought the glass to his lips — but it was empty. Dumbledore groaned and began to pant. "But I had some — wait — Aguamenti!" said Harry again, pointing his wand at the goblet. Once more, for a second, clear wa-ter gleamed within it, but as he approached Dumbledores mouth, the water vanished again. "Sir, I'm trying, I'm trying!" said Harry desperately, but he did not think that Dumbledore could hear him; he had rolled onto his side and was drawing great, rattling breaths that sounded agoniz-ing. "Aguamenti —Aguamenti —AGUAMENTI!"

The goblet filled and emptied once more. And now Dumble-dores breathing was fading. His brain whirling in panic, Harry knew, instinctively, the only way left to get water, because Voldemort had planned it so ... He flung himself over to the edge of the rock and plunged the goblet into the lake, bringing it up full to the brim of icy water that did not vanish. "Sir —

here!" Harry yelled, and lunging forward, he tipped the water clumsily over Dumbledores face.

It was the best he could do, for the icy feeling on his arm not holding the cup was not the lingering chill of the water. A slimy white hand had gripped his wrist, and the creature to whom it be-longed was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The sur-face of the lake was no longer mirror-smooth; it was churning, and everywhere Harry looked, white heads and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were moving toward the rock: an army of the dead rising from the black water.

"Petrificus Totalus!" yelled Harry, struggling to cling to the smooth, soaked surface of the island as he pointed his wand at the Inferius that had his arm. It released him, falling backward into the water with a splash; he scrambled to his feet, but many more Inferi were already climbing onto the rock, their bony hands clawing at its slippery surface, their blank, frosted eyes upon him, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry bellowed again, backing away as he swiped his wand through the air; six or seven of them crumpled, but more were coming toward him. "Impedimenta! Incarcerous!" A few of them stumbled, one or two of them bound in ropes, but those climbing onto the rock behind them merely stepped over or on the fallen bodies. Still slashing at the air with his wand, Harry yelled, "Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!" But though gashes appeared in their sodden rags and their icy skin, they had no blood to spill: They walked on, unfeeling, their shrunken hands outstretched

toward him, and as he backed away still farther, he felt arms enclose him from behind, thin, fleshly. arms cold as death, and his feet left the ground as they lifted him and began to carry him, slowly and surely, back to the water, and he knew there would be no release, that he would be drowned, and become one more dead guardian of a fragment of Voldemorts shattered soul...

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the Inferi holding Harry so tightly stumbled and faltered; they did not dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped Harry; he hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and fell, grazing his arms, then scrambled back up, raising his wand and staring around.

Dumbledore was on his feet again, pale as any of the surrounding Inferi, but taller than any too, the fire dancing in his eyes; his wand was raised like a torch and from its tip emanated the flames, like a vast lasso, encircling them all with warmth. The Inferi bumped into each other, attempting, blindly, to escape the fire in which they were enclosed. . . .

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he gestured to Harry to come to his side. Distracted by the flames, the Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Harry back to the boat, the ring of fire moving with them, around them, the bewildered Inferi accompanying them to the waters edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their dark waters.

Harry, who was shaking all over, thought for a moment that Dumbledore might not be able to climb into the boat; he staggered a little as he attempted it; all his efforts seemed to be going into maintaining the ring of protective flame around them. Harry seized him and helped him back to his seat. Once they were both safely jammed inside again, the boat began to move back across the black water, away from the rock, still encircled by that ring of fire, and it seemed that the Inferi swarming below them did not dare resurface.

"Sir," panted Harry, "sir, I forgot — about fire — they were coming at me and I panicked —"

"Quite understandable," murmured Dumbledore. Harry was alarmed to hear how faint his voice was.

They reached the bank with a little bump and Harry leapt out, then turned quickly to help Dumbledore. The moment that Dumbledore reached the bank he let his wand hand fall; the ring of fire vanished, but the Inferi did not emerge again from the water. The little boat sank into the water once more; clanking and tinkling, its chain slithered back into the lake too. Dumbledore gave a great sigh and leaned against the cavern wall.

"I am weak..." he said.

"Don't worry, sir," said Harry at once, anxious about Dumbledore's extreme pallor and by his air of exhaustion. "Don't worry, I'll get us back. . . . Lean on me, sir. . . ."

And pulling Dumbledore's uninjured arm around his shoulders, Harry guided his headmaster back around the lake, bearing most of his weight.

"The protection was . . . after all... well-designed," said Dumbledore faintly. "One alone could not have done it. ... You did well, very well, Harry. ..."

"Don't talk now," said Harry, fearing how slurred Dumbledore's voice had become, how much his feet dragged. "Save your energy, sir. . . . We'll soon be out of here. . . ."

"The archway will have sealed again. . . . My knife ..." '

"There's no need, I got cut on the rock," said Harry firmly. "Just tell me where. . . ."

"Here . . ."

Harry wiped his grazed forearm upon the stone: Having re-ceived its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly. They crossed the outer cave, and Harry helped Dumbledore back into the icy seawater that filled the crevice in the cliff.

"It's going to be all right, sir," Harry said over and over again, more worried by Dumbledore's silence than he had been by his weakened voice. "We're nearly there. ... I can Apparate us both back . . . Don't worry. . . ."

"I am not worried, Harry," said Dumbledore, his voice a little stronger despite the freezing water. "I am with you."

Chapter 27: The Lightning-Struck Tower

Once back under the starry sky, Harry heaved Dumbledore on to the top of the nearest boulder and then to his feet. Sodden and shivering, Dumbledore's weight still upon him, Harry concentrated harder than he had ever done upon his destination: Hogsmeade. Closing his eyes, gripping Dumbledore's arm as tightly as he could, he stepped forwards into that feeling of horrible compression.

He knew it had worked before he opened his eyes: the smell of salt, the sea breeze had gone. He and Dumbledore were shivering and dripping in the middle of the dark High Street in Hogsmeade. For one horrible moment Harry's imagination showed him more Inferi creeping towards him around the sides of shops, but he blinked and saw that nothing was stirring; all was still, the darkness complete but for a few streetlamps and lit upper windows.

'We did it, Professor!' Harry whispered with difficulty; he suddenly realised that he had a searing stitch in his chest. 'We did it! We got the Horcrux!'

Dumbledore staggered against him. For a moment, Harry thought that his inexpert Apparition had thrown Dumbledore off-balance; then he saw his face, paler and damper than ever in the distant light of a streetlamp.

'Sir, are you all right?'

'I've been better,' said Dumbledore weakly, though the corners of his mouth twitched. That potion ... was no health drink ..."

And to Harry's horror, Dumbledore sank on to the ground.

'Sir - it's OK, sir, you're going to be all right, don't worry -'

He looked around desperately for help, but there was nobody to be seen and all he could think was that he must somehow get Dumbledore quickly to the hospital wing.

'We need to get you up to the school, sir ... Madam Pomfrey ...'

'No,' said Dumbledore. 'It is ... Professor Snape whom I need ... but I do not think ... I can walk very far just yet ...'

'Right - sir, listen - I'm going to knock on a door, find a place you can stay - then I can run and get Madam -'

'Severus,' said Dumbledore clearly. 'I need Severus ...'

'All right then, Snape - but I'm going to have to leave you for a moment so I can -'

Before Harry could make a move, however, he heard running footsteps. His heart leapt: somebody had seen, somebody knew they needed help - and looking around he saw Madam Rosmerta scurrying down the dark street

towards them on high-heeled, fluffy slippers, wearing a silk dressing-gown embroidered with dragons.

'I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains! Thank goodness, thank goodness, I couldn't think what to - but what's wrong with Albus?'

She came to a halt, panting, and stared down, wide-eyed, at Dumbledore.

'He's hurt,' said Harry. 'Madam Rosmerta, can he come into the Three Broomsticks while I go up to the school and get help for him?'

'You can't go up there alone! Don't you realise - haven't you seen -?'

'If you help me support him,' said Harry, not listening to her, 'I think we can get him inside -'

'What has happened?' asked Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta, what's wrong?'

The - the Dark Mark, Albus.'

And she pointed into the sky, in the direction of Hogwarts. Dread flooded Harry at the sound of the words ... he turned and looked.

There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blazing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters left behind whenever they had entered a building ... wherever they had murdered ...

'When did it appear?' asked Dumbledore, and his hand clenched painfully upon Harry's shoulder as he struggled to his feet.

'Must have been minutes ago, it wasn't there when I put the cat out, but when I got upstairs -'

'We need to return to the castle at once,' said Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta,' and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation, 'we need transport - brooms -'

'I've got a couple behind the bar,' she said, looking very frightened. 'Shall I run and fetch -?'

'No, Harry can do it.'

Harry raised his wand at once.

'Accio Rosmerta's brooms.'

A second later they heard a loud bang as the front door of the pub burst open; two brooms had shot out into the street and were racing each other to Harry's side, where they stopped dead, quivering slightly, at waist height.

'Rosmerta, please send a message to the Ministry,' said Dumbledore, as he mounted the broom nearest him. 'It might be that nobody within Hogwarts has yet realised anything is wrong ... Harry, put on your Invisibility Cloak.'

Harry pulled his Cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself before mounting his broom; Madam Rosmerta was already tottering back towards her pub as Harry and Dumble-dore kicked off from the ground and rose up into the air. As they sped towards the castle, Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, ready to grab him should he fall, but the sight of the Dark Mark seemed to have acted upon Dumbledore like a stimulant: he was bent low over his broom, his eyes fixed upon the Mark, his long silver hair and beard flying behind him in the night air. And Harry, too, looked ahead at the skull, and fear swelled inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs, driving all other discomfort from his mind ...

How long had they been away? Had Ron, Hermione and Ginny's luck run out by now? Was it one of them who had caused the Mark to be set over the school, or was it Neville, or Luna, or some other member of the DA? And if it was ... he was the one who had told them to patrol the corridors, he had asked them to leave the safety of their beds ... would he be responsible, again, for the death of a friend?

As they flew over the dark, twisting lane down which they had walked earlier, Harry heard, over the whistling of the night air in his ears, Dumbledore muttering in some strange language again. He thought he understood why as he felt his broom shudder for a moment when they flew over the bound-ary wall into the grounds: Dumbledore was undoing the enchantments he himself had set around the castle, so that they could enter at speed. The Dark Mark was glittering directly above the Astronomy Tower, the highest of the castle. Did that mean the death had occurred there?

Dumbledore had already crossed the crenellated ramparts and was dismounting; Harry landed next to him seconds later and looked around.

The ramparts were deserted. The door to the spiral staircase that led back into the castle was closed. There was no sign of a struggle, of a fight to the death, of a body.

'What does it mean?' Harry asked Dumbledore, looking up at the green skull with its serpent's tongue glinting evilly above them. 'Is it the real Mark? Has someone definitely been - Professor?'

In the dim green glow from the Mark Harry saw Dumbledore clutching at his chest with his blackened hand.

'Go and wake Severus,' said Dumbledore faintly but clearly. Tell him what has happened and bring him to me. Do nothing else, speak to nobody else and do not remove your Cloak. I shall wait here.'

'But -'

'You swore to obey me, Harry - go!'

Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral staircase, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he heard running footsteps on the other side. He looked round at Dumbledore, who gestured to him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so.

The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted: 'Expelliarmus!'

Harry's body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the Tower wall, propped like an unsteady statue, unable to move or speak. He could not understand how it had happened - Expelliarmus was not a Freezing Charm -

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore's wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and understood ... Dumbledore had wordlessly immobilised Harry, and the second he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely looked across at his disarmer and said, 'Good evening, Draco.'

Malfoy stepped forwards, glancing around quickly to check that he and Dumbledore were alone. His eyes fell upon the second broom.

'Who else is here?'

'A question I might ask you. Or are you acting alone?'

Harry saw Malfoy's pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

'No,' he said. 'I've got back-up. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight.'

'Well, well,' said Dumbledore, as though Malfoy was showing him an ambitious homework project. 'Very good indeed. You found a way to let them in, did you?'

'Yeah,' said Malfoy, who was panting. 'Right under your nose and you never realised!'

'Ingenious,' said Dumbledore. 'Yet ... forgive me ... where are they now? You seem unsupported.'

They met some of your guard. They're having a fight down below. They won't be long ... I came on ahead. I - I've got a job to do.'

'Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy,' said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralysed body, staring at the two of them, his ears straining to hear sounds of the Death Eaters' distant fight, and in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore who, incredibly, smiled.

'Draco, Draco, you are not a killer.'

'How do you know?' said Malfoy at once.

He seemed to realise how childish the words had sounded; Harry saw him flush in the Mark's greenish light.

'You don't know what I'm capable of,' said Malfoy more forcefully, 'you don't know what I've done!'

'Oh, yes, I do,' said Dumbledore mildly. 'You almost killed Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley. You have been trying, with increasing desperation, to kill me all year. Forgive me, Draco, but they have been feeble attempts ... so feeble, to be honest, that I wonder whether your heart has been really in it...'

'It has been in it!' said Malfoy vehemently. 'I've been work- ing on it all year, and tonight -'

Somewhere in the depths of the castle below Harry heard a muffled yell. Malfoy stiffened and glanced over his shoulder.

'Somebody is putting up a good fight,' said Dumbledore conversationally. 'But you were saying ... yes, you have man-aged to introduce Death Eaters into my school which, I admit, I thought impossible ... how did you do it?'

But Malfoy said nothing: he was still listening to whatever was happening below and seemed almost as paralysed as Harry was.

'Perhaps you ought to get on with the job alone,' suggested Dumbledore. 'What if your back-up has been thwarted by my guard? As you have perhaps realised, there are members of the Order of the Phoenix here tonight, too. And after all, you don't really need help ... I have no wand at the moment ... I cannot defend myself.'

Malfoy merely stared at him.

'I see,' said Dumbledore kindly, when Malfoy neither moved nor spoke. 'You are afraid to act until they join you.'»

'I'm not afraid!' snarled Malfoy, though he still made no move to hurt Dumbledore. 'It's you who should be scared!'

'But why? I don't think you will kill me, Draco. Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe ... so tell me, while we wait for your friends ... how did you smuggle them in here? It seems to have taken you a long time to work out how to do it.'

Malfoy looked as though he was fighting down the urge to shout, or to vomit. He gulped and took several deep breaths, glaring at Dumbledore, his wand pointing directly at the latter's heart. Then, as though he could not help himself, he said, 'I had to mend that broken Vanishing Cabinet that no one's used for years. The one Montague got lost in last year.'

'Aaaah.'

Dumbledore's sigh was half a groan. He closed his eyes for a moment.

That was clever ... there is a pair, I take it?'

'The other's in Borgin and Burkes,' said Malfoy, 'and they make a kind of passage between them. Montague told me that when he was stuck in the Hogwarts one, he was trapped in limbo but sometimes he could hear what was going on at school, and sometimes what was going on in the shop, as if the Cabinet was travelling between them, but he couldn't make anyone hear him ... in the end he managed to Apparate out, even though he'd never passed his test. He nearly died doing it. Everyone thought it was a really good story, but I was the only one who realised what it meant - even Borgin didn't know - I was the one who realised there could be a way into Hogwarts through the Cabinets if I fixed the broken one.'

'Very good,' murmured Dumbledore. 'So the Death Eaters were able to pass from Borgin and Burkes into the school to help you ... a clever plan, a very clever plan ... and, as you say, right under my nose ...'

'Yeah,' said Malfoy who, bizarrely, seemed to draw courage and comfort from Dumbledore's praise. 'Yeah, it was!'

'But there were times,' Dumbledore went on, 'weren't there, when you were not sure you would succeed in mending the Cabinet? And you resorted to crude and badly judged measures such as sending me a cursed necklace

that was bound to reach the wrong hands ... poisoning mead there was only the slightest chance I might drink ...'

'Yeah, well, you still didn't realise who was behind that stuff, did you?' sneered Malfoy, as Dumbledore slid a little down the ramparts, the strength in his legs apparently fading, and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him.

'As a matter of fact, I did,' said Dumbledore. 'I was sure it was you.'

'Why didn't you stop me, then?' Malfoy demanded.

'I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders -'

'He hasn't been doing your orders, he promised my mother -'

'Of course that is what he would tell you, Draco, but -'

'He's a double-agent, you stupid old man, he isn't working for you, you just think he is!'

'We must agree to differ on that, Draco. It so happens that I trust Professor Snape -'

'Well, you're losing your grip, then!' sneered Malfoy. 'He's been offering me plenty of help - wanting all the glory for himself - wanting a bit of the

action - "What are you doing? Did you do the necklace, that was stupid, it could have blown everything -" But I haven't told him what I've been doing in the Room of Requirement, he's going to wake up tomorrow and it'll all be over and he won't be the Dark Lord's favourite any more, he'll be nothing compared to me, nothing!"

'Very gratifying,' said Dumbledore mildly. 'We all like* appreciation for our own hard work, of course ... but you must have had an accomplice, all the same ... someone in Hogsmeade, someone who was able to slip Katie the - the - aaaah

Dumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep.

'... of course ... Rosmerta. How long has she been under the Imperius Curse?'

'Got there at last, have you?' Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then back at Dumbledore, who went on, 'So poor Rosmerta was forced to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied? And the poisoned mead ... well, naturally, Rosmerta was able to poison it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present ... yes, very neat ... very neat ... poor Mr Filch would not, of course, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta's ... tell me,

how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had all methods of communication in and out of the school monitored.'

'Enchanted coins,' said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. 'I had one and she had the other and I could send her messages -'

'Isn't that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore's Army used last year?' asked Dumbledore. His voice was light and conversational, but Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

'Yeah, I got the idea from them,' said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. 'I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Mudblood Granger, as well, I heard her talking in the library about Filch not recognising potions ...'

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'Please do not use that offensive word in front of me,' said Dumbledore.

Malfoy gave a harsh laugh.

'You care about me saying "Mudblood" when I'm about to kill you?'

'Yes, I do,' said Dumbledore, and Harry saw his feet slide a little on the floor as he struggled to remain upright. 'But as for being about to kill me, Draco, you have had several long minutes now. We are quite alone. I am more defenceless than you can have dreamed of finding me, and still you have not acted ...'

Malfoy's mouth contorted involuntarily, as though he had tasted something very bitter.

'Now, about tonight,' Dumbledore went on, 'I am a little puzzled about how it happened ... you knew that I had left the school? But of course,' he answered his own question, 'Rosmerta saw me leaving, she tipped you off using your ingenious coins, I'm sure ...'

'That's right,' said Malfoy. 'But she said you were just going for a drink, you'd be back ...'

'Well, I certainly did have a drink ... and I came back ... after a fashion,' mumbled Dumbledore. 'So you decided to spring a trap for me?'

'We decided to put the Dark Mark over the Tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who'd been killed,' said Malfoy. 'And it worked!'

'Well ... yes and no ...' said Dumbledore. 'But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?'

'Someone's dead,' said Malfoy and his voice seemed to go up an octave as he said it. 'One of your people ... I don't know who, it was dark ... I stepped over the body ... I was* supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way ...'

'Yes, they do that,' said Dumbledore.

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual spiral staircase that led to where Dumbledore, Malfoy and Harry stood, and Harry's heart thundered unheard in his invisible chest ... someone was dead ... Malfoy had stepped over the body ... but who was it?

There is little time, one way or another,' said Dumbledore. 'So let us discuss your options, Draco.'

'My options!' said Malfoy loudly. 'I'm standing here with a wand - I'm about to kill you -'

'My dear boy, let us have no more pretence about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first Disarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means.'

'I haven't got any options!' said Malfoy, and he was suddenly as white as Dumbledore. 'I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill my whole family!'

'I appreciate the difficulty of your position,' said Dumbledore. 'Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realised that I suspected you.'

Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

'I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you,' continued Dumbledore. 'But now at last we can speak plainly to each other ... no harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived ... I can help you, Draco.'

'No, you can't,' said Malfoy, his wand hand shaking very badly indeed. 'Nobody can. He told me to do it or he'll kill me. I've got no choice.'

'Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban ... when the time comes we can protect him too ... come over to the right side, Draco ... you are not a killer ...'

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

'But I got this far, didn't I?' he said slowly. They thought I'd die in the attempt, but I'm here ... and you're in my power ... I'm the one with the wand ... you're at my mercy ...'

'No, Draco,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now.'

Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still trembling. Harry thought he saw it drop by a fraction -

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four people in black robes burst through the door on to the ram-parts. Still paralysed, his eyes staring unblinkingly, Harry gazed in terror upon four strangers: it seemed the Death Eaters had won the fight below.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle.

'Dumbledore cornered!' he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister and who was grinning eagerly. 'Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!'

'Good evening, Amycus,' said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. 'And you've brought Alecto too ... charming ...'

The woman gave an angry little titter.

Think your little jokes'll help you on your death bed, then?' she jeered.

'Jokes? No, no, these are manners,' replied Dumbledore.

'Do it,' said the stranger standing nearest to Harry, a big, rangy man with matted grey hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater's robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat and, unmistakably, of blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails.

'Is that you, Fenrir?' asked Dumbledore.

That's right,' rasped the other. 'Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?'

'No, I cannot say that I am ...'

Fenrir Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

'But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore.'

'Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual ... you have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?'

That's right,' said Greyback. 'Shocks you, that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?'

'Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little,' said Dumbledore. 'And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live...'

'I didn't,' breathed Malfoy. He was not looking at Greyback; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. 'I didn't know he was going to come -'

'I wouldn't want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore,' rasped Greyback. 'Not when there are throats to be ripped out ... delicious, delicious ...'

And he raised a yellow fingernail and picked at his front teeth, leering at Dumbledore.

'I could do you for afters, Dumbledore ...'

'No,' said the fourth Death Eater sharply. He had a heavy, brutal-looking face. 'We've got orders. Draco's got to do it. Now, Draco, and quickly.'

Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore's face, which was even paler, and rather lower than usual, as he had slid so far down the rampart wall.

'He's not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!' said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister's wheezing giggles. 'Look at him - what's happened to you, then, Dumby?'

'Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus,' said Dumbledore. 'Old age, in short ... one day, perhaps, it will happen to you ... if you are lucky ...'

'What's that mean, then, what's that mean?' yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent. 'Always the same, weren't yeh, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing, I don't even know why the Dark Lord's bothering to kill yeh! Come on, Draco, do it!'

But at that moment, there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, 'They've blocked the stairs - Reducto! REDUCTO!'

Harry's heart leapt: so these four had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the Tower, and, by the sound of it, created a barrier behind them -

'Now, Draco, quickly!' said the brutal-faced man angrily.

But Malfoy's hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

'Til do it,' snarled Greyback, moving towards Dumbledore with his hands outstretched, his teeth bared.

'I said no!' shouted the brutal-faced man; there was a flash of light and the werewolf was blasted out of the way; he hit the ramparts and staggered, looking furious. Harry's heart was hammering so hard it seemed impossible that nobody could hear him standing there, imprisoned by Dumbledore's spell -if he could only move, he could aim a curse from under the Cloak -

'Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us -' screeched the woman, but at that precise moment the door to the ramparts burst open once more and there stood Snape, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, including the enraged werewolf, and Malfoy.

'We've got a problem, Snape,' said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, 'the boy doesn't seem able -'

But somebody else had spoken Snape's name, quite softly.

'Severus ...'

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading.

Snape said nothing, but walked forwards and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

'Severus ... please ...'

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

'Avada Kedavra!'

A jet of green light shot from the end of Snape's wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry's scream of horror never left him; silent and unmoving, he was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air: for a split second he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backwards, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight.

Chapter 28: Flight of the Prince

Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; it had not happened. . . . It could not have happened. ...

"Out of here, quickly," said Snape.

He seized Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and forced him through the door ahead of the rest; Greyback and the squat brother and sister followed, the latter both panting excitedly. As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed against the wall was not magic, but horror and shock. He threw the Invisibility Cloak aside as the brutal-faced Death Eater, last to leave the tower top, was disappearing through the door.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The Death Eater buckled as though hit in the back with something solid and fell to the ground, rigid as a waxwork, but he had barely hit the floor when Harry was clambering over him and running down the darkened staircase.

Terror tore at Harry's heart. ... He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape. ... Somehow the two things were linked. ... He could reverse what had happened if he had them both together. ... Dumbledore could not have died. ...

He leapt the last ten steps of the spiral staircase and stopped where he landed, his wand raised. The dimly lit corridor was full of dust; half the ceiling seemed to have fallen in; and a battle was raging before him, but even as he attempted to make out who were fighting whom, he heard the hated voice shout, "It's over, time to go!" and saw Snape disappearing around the corner at the far end of the corridor; he and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight unscathed. As Harry plunged after them, one of the fighters detached themselves from the fray and flew at him: it was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on top of Harry before Harry could raise his wand: Harry fell backward, with filthy matted hair in his face, the stench of sweat and blood filling his nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at his throat

-

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry felt Fenrir collapse against him; with a stupendous effort he pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a jet of green light came flying toward him; he ducked and ran, headfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squashy and slippery on the floor and he stumbled: There were two bodies lying there, lying facedown in a pool of blood, but there was no time to investigate. Harry now saw red hair flying like flames in front of him: Ginny was locked in combat with the lumpy Death Eater, Amycus, who was throwing hex after hex at her while she dodged them: Amycus was giggling, enjoying the sport: "Crucio - Crucio - you can't dance forever, pretty-"

"Impedimenta!" yelled Harry.

His jinx hit Amycus in the chest: He gave a piglike squeal of pain, was lifted off his feet and slammed into the opposite wall, slid down it, and fell out of sight behind Ron, Professor McGonagall, and Lupin, each of whom was battling a separate Death Eater. Beyond them, Harry saw Tonks fighting an enormous blond wizard who was sending curses flying in all directions, so that they ricocheted off the walls around them, cracking stone, shattering the nearest window -

"Harry, where did you come from?" Ginny cried, but there was no time to answer her. He put his head down and sprinted forward, narrowly avoiding a blast that erupted over his head, showering them all in bits of wall. Snape must not escape, he must catch up with Snape -

"Take that!" shouted Professor McGonagall, and Harry glimpsed the female Death Eater, Alecto, sprinting away down the corridor with her arms over her head, her brother right behind her. He launched himself after them but his foot caught on something, and next moment he was lying across someone's legs. Looking around, he saw Neville's pale, round face flat against the floor. "Neville, are you - ?"

"M'all right," muttered Neville, who was clutching his stomach, "Harry . . . Snape 'n' Malfoy . . . ran past. . ."

"I know, I'm on it!" said Harry, aiming a hex from the floor at the enormous blond Death Eater who was causing most of the chaos. The man gave a howl of pain as the spell hit him in the face: He wheeled around, staggered, and then pounded away after the brother and sister. Harry

scrambled up from the floor and began to sprint along the corridor, ignoring the bangs issuing from behind him, the yells of the others to come back, and the mute call of the figures on the ground whose fate he did not yet know. . .

He skidded around the corner, his trainers slippery with blood; Snape had an immense head start. Was it possible that he had already entered the cabinet in the Room of Requirement, or had the Order made steps to secure it, to prevent the Death Eaters retreating that way? He could hear nothing but his own pounding feet, his own hammering heart as he sprinted along the next empty corridor, but then spotted a bloody footprint that showed at least one of the fleeing Death Eaters was heading toward the front doors - perhaps the Room of Requirement was indeed blocked -

He skidded around another corner and a curse flew past him; he dived behind a suit of armor that exploded. He saw the brother and sister running down the marble staircase ahead and aimed jinxes at them, but merely hit several bewigged witches in a portrait on the landing, who ran screeching into neighboring paintings. As he leapt the wreckage of armor, Harry heard more shouts and screams; other people within the castle seemed to have awoken. . . .

He pelted toward a shortcut, hoping to overtake the brother and sister and close in on Snape and Malfoy, who must surely have reached the grounds by now. Remembering to leap the vanishing step halfway down the concealed staircase, he burst through a tapestry at the bottom and out into a corridor where a number of bewildered and pajama-clad Hufflepuffs stood.

"Harry! We heard a noise, and someone said something about the Dark Mark -" began Ernie Macmillan.

"Out of the way!" yelled Harry, knocking two boys aside as he sprinted toward the landing and down the remainder of the marble staircase. The oak front doors had been blasted open, there were smears of blood on the flagstones, and several terrified students stood huddled against the walls, one or two still cowering with their arms over their faces. The giant Gryffindor hourglass had been hit by a curse, and the rubies within were still falling, with a loud rattle, onto the flagstones below.

Harry flew across the entrance hall and out into the dark grounds: He could just make out three figures racing across the lawn, heading for the gates beyond which they could Disapparate - by the looks of them, the huge blond Death Eater and, some way ahead of him, Snape and Malfoy. ...

The cold night air ripped at Harry's lungs as he tore after them; he saw a flash of light in the distance that momentarily silhouetted his quarry. He did not know what it was but continued to run, not yet near enough to get a good aim with a curse -

Another flash, shouts, retaliatory jets of light, and Harry understood: Hagrid had emerged from his cabin and was trying to stop the Death Eaters escaping, and though every breath seemed to shred his lungs and the stitch in his chest was like fire, Harry sped up as an unbidden voice in his head said: not Hagrid. . . not Hagrid too . . .

Something caught Harry hard in the small of the back and he fell forward, his face smacking the ground, blood pouring out of both nostrils: He knew, even as he rolled over, his wand ready, that the brother and sister he had overtaken using his shortcut were closing in behind him. . . .

"Impedimenta!" he yelled as he rolled over again, crouching close to the dark ground, and miraculously his jinx hit one of them, who stumbled and fell, tripping up the other; Harry leapt to his feet and sprinted on after Snape.

And now he saw the vast outline of Hagrid, illuminated by the light of the crescent moon revealed suddenly behind clouds; the blond Death Eater was aiming curse after curse at the gamekeeper; but Hagrids immense strength and the toughened skin he had inherited from his giantess mother seemed to be protecting him. Snape and Malfoy, however, were still running; they would soon be beyond the gates, able to Disapparate -

Harry tore past Hagrid and his opponent, took aim at Snape's back, and yelled, "Stupefy!"

He missed; the jet of red light soared past Snape's head; Snape shouted, "Run, Draco!" and turned. Twenty yards apart, he and Harry looked at each other before raising their wands simultaneously.

"Cruc - "

But Snape parried the curse, knocking Harry backward off his feet before he could complete it; Harry rolled over and scrambled back up again as the

huge Death Eater behind him yelled, "Incendio!" Harry heard an explosive bang and a dancing orange light spilled over all of them: Hagrid's house was on fire.

"Fang's in there, yer evil - !" Hagrid bellowed.

"Cruc -" yelled Harry for the second time, aiming for the figure ahead illuminated in the dancing firelight, but Snape blocked the spell again. Harry could see him sneering.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" he shouted over the rushing of the flames, Hagrid's yells, and the wild yelping of the trapped Fang. "You haven't got the nerve or the ability -"

"Incarc-" Harry roared, but Snape deflected the spell with an almost lazy flick of his arm.

"Fight back!" Harry screamed at him. "Fight back, you cowardly-----"

"Coward, did you call me, Potter?" shouted Snape. "Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?" "Stupe-"

"Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!" sneered Snape, deflecting the curse once more. "Now come!" he shouted at the huge Death Eater behind Harry. "It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up -"

"Impedi -"

But before he could finish this jinx, excruciating pain hit Harry; he keeled over in the grass. Someone was screaming, he would surely die of this agony, Snape was going to torture him to death or madness -

"No!" roared Snape's voice and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started; Harry lay curled on the dark grass, clutching his wand and panting; somewhere overhead Snape was shouting, "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord - we are to leave him! Go! Go!"

And Harry felt the ground shudder under his face as the brother and sister and the enormous Death Eater obeyed, running toward the gates. Harry uttered an inarticulate yell of rage: In that instant, he cared not whether he lived or died. Pushing himself to his feet again, he staggered blindly toward Snape, the man he now hated as much as he hated Voldemort himself -

"Sectum - "

Snape flicked his wand and the curse was repelled yet again; but Harry was mere feet away now and he could see Snape's face clearly at last: He was no longer sneering or jeering; the blazing flames showed a face full of rage. Mustering all his powers of concentration, Harry thought, Levi -

"No, Potter!" screamed Snape. There was a loud BANG and Harry was soaring backward, hitting the ground hard again, ;un\ this time his wand flew

out of his hand. He could hear Hagrid yelling and Fang howling as Snape closed in and looked down on him where he lay, wandless and defenseless as Dumbledore had been. Snape's pale face, illuminated by the flaming cabin, was suffused with hatred just as it had been before he had cursed Dumbledore.

"You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them - I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so . . . no"

Harry had dived for his wand; Snape shot a hex at it and it flew feet away into the darkness and out of sight.

"Kill me then," panted Harry, who felt no fear at all, but only rage and contempt. "Kill me like you killed him, you coward -"

"DON'T -" screamed Snape, and his face was suddenly demented, inhuman, as though he was in as much pain as the yelping, howling dog stuck in the burning house behind them - "CALL ME COWARD!"

And he slashed at the air: Harry felt a white-hot, whiplike something hit him across the face and was slammed backward into the ground. Spots of light burst in front of his eyes and for a moment all the breath seemed to have gone from his body, then he heard a rush of wings above him and something enormous obscured the stars. Buckbeak had flown at Snape, who staggered backward as the razor-sharp claws slashed at him. As Harry raised himself into a sitting position, his head still swimming from its last contact

with the ground, he saw Snape running as hard as he could, the enormous beast flapping behind him and screeching as Harry had never heard him screech -

Harry struggled to his feet, looking around groggily for his wand, hoping to give chase again, but even as his fingers fumbled in the grass, discarding twigs, he knew it would be too late, and sure enough, by the time he had located his wand, he turned only to see the hippogriff circling the gates. Snape had managed to Disapparate just beyond the school's boundaries.

"Hagrid," muttered Harry, still dazed, looking around. "HAGRID?"

He stumbled toward the burning house as an enormous figure emerged from out of the flames carrying Fang on his back. With a cry of thankfulness, Harry sank to his knees; he was shaking in every limb, his body ached all over, and his breath came in painful stabs.

"Yeh all righ', Harry? Yeh all righ'?' Speak ter me, Harry. . . ."

Hagrids huge, hairy face was swimming above Harry, blocking out the stars. Harry could smell burnt wood and dog hair; he put out a hand and felt Fang's reassuringly warm and alive body quivering beside him.

"I'm all right," panted Harry. "Are you?" "'Course I am . . . take more'n that ter finish me."

Hagrid put his hands under Harry's arms and raised him up with such force that Harry's feet momentarily left the ground before Hagrid set him upright again. He could see blood trickling down Hagrid's cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly.

"We should put out your house," said Harry, "the charm's 'Aguamenti' ..."

"Knew it was summat like that," mumbled Hagrid, and he raised a smoldering pink, flowery umbrella and said, "Aguamenti!"

A jet of water flew out of the umbrella tip. Harry raised his wand arm, which felt like lead, and murmured "Aguamenti" too: Together, he and Hagrid poured water on the house until the last flame was extinguished.

"S'not too bad," said Hagrid hopefully a few minutes later, looking at the smoking wreck. "Nothin Dumbledore won' be able to put righ' . . ."

Harry felt a searing pain in his stomach at the sound of the name. In the silence and the stillness, horror rose inside him.

"Hagrid ..."

"I was bindin' up a couple o' bowtruckle legs when I heard 'em coming," said Hagrid sadly, still staring at his wrecked cabin. "They'll bin burnt ter twigs, poor little things. . . ."

"Hagrid . . ."

"But what happened, Harry? I jus' saw them Death Eaters run-nin down from the castle, but what the ruddy hell was Snape doin' with 'em? Where's he gone - was he chasin' them?"

"He . . ." Harry cleared his throat; it was dry from panic and the smoke. "Hagrid, he killed . . ."

"Killed?" said Hagrid loudly, staring down at Harry. "Snape killed? What're yeh on abou', Harry?"

"Dumbledore," said Harry. "Snape killed . . . Dumbledore."

Hagrid simply looked at him, the little of his face that could be seen completely blank, uncomprehending.

"Dumbledore wha, Harry?"

"He's dead. Snape killed him...."

"Don' say that," said Hagrid roughly. "Snape kill Dumbledore - don' be stupid, Harry. Wha's made yeh say tha'?"

"I saw it happen." , ,..

"Yeh couldn' have."

"I saw it, Hagrid."

Hagrid shook his head; his expression was disbelieving but sympathetic, and Harry knew that Hagrid thought he had sustained a blow to the head, that he was confused, perhaps by the aftereffects of a jinx. ...

"What musta happened was, Dumbledore musta told Snape ter go with them Death Eaters," Hagrid said confidently. "I suppose he's gotta keep his cover. Look, let's get yeh back up ter the school. Come on, Harry. ..."

Harry did not attempt to argue or explain. He was still shaking uncontrollably. Hagrid would find out soon enough, too soon. ... As they directed their steps back toward the castle, Harry saw that many of its windows were lit now. He could imagine, clearly, the scenes inside as people moved from room to room, telling each other that Death Eaters had got in, that the Mark was shining over Hogwarts, that somebody must have been killed. . . .

The oak front doors stood open ahead of them, light flooding out onto the drive and the lawn. Slowly, uncertainly, dressing-gowned people were creeping down the steps, looking around nervously for some sign of the Death Eaters who had fled into the night. Harry's eyes, however, were fixed upon the ground at the foot of the tallest tower. He imagined that he could see a black, huddled mass lying in the grass there, though he was really too far away to see anything of the sort. Even as he stared wordlessly at the place where he thought

Dumbledore's body must lie, however, he saw people beginning to move toward it.

"What're they all lookin' at?" said Hagrid, as he and Harry approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could to their ankles. "Wha's that lyin' on the grass?" Hagrid added sharply, heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. "See it, Harry? Right at the foot of the tower? Under where the Mark . . . Blimey . . . yeh don' think someone got thrown - ?"

Hagrid fell silent, the thought apparently too horrible to express aloud. Harry walked alongside him, feeling the aches and pains in his face and his legs where the various hexes of the last half hour had hit him, though in an oddly detached way, as though somebody near him was suffering them. What was real and inescapable was the awful pressing feeling in his chest. . .

He and Hagrid moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students and teachers had left a gap.

Harry heard Hagrid's moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and crouched down beside him. He had known there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known that it could have happened only because its caster was dead, but there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, meet.

Dumbledore's eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, straightened the half-moon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help-----

The crowd murmured behind Harry. After what seemed like a long time, he became aware that he was kneeling upon something hard and looked down.

The locket they had managed to steal so many hours before had fallen out of Dumbledore's pocket. It had opened, perhaps due to the force with which it hit the ground. And although he could not feel more shock or horror or sadness than he felt already, Harry knew, as he picked it up, that there was something wrong-----

He turned the locket over in his hands. This was neither as large as the locket he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, nor were there any markings upon it, no sign of the ornate S that was supposed to be Slytherins mark. Moreover, there was nothing inside but for a scrap of folded parchment wedged tightly into the place where a portrait should have been.

Automatically, without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry pulled out the fragment of parchment, opened it, and read by the light of the many wands that had now been lit behind him:

To the Dark Lord

I now I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who dicovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

Harry neither knew nor cared what the message meant. Only one thing mattered: This was not a Horcrux. Dumbledore had weakened himself by drinking that terrible potion for nothing. Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl.

Chapter 29: The Pheonix Lament

C 'mere, Harry ..."

"No."

"Yeh can' stay here, Harry. ... Come on, now...." "No."

He did not want to leave Dumbledores side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid's hand on his shoulder was trembling. Then another voice said, "Harry, come on."

A much smaller and warmer hand had enclosed his and was pulling him upward. He obeyed its pressure without really thinking about it. Only as he walked blindly back through the crowd did he realize, from a trace of flowery scent on the air, that it was Ginny who was leading him back into the castle. Incomprehensible voices battered him, sobs and shouts and wails stabbed the night, but Harry and Ginny walked on, back up the steps into the entrance hall. Faces swam on the edges of Harry's vision, people were peering at him, whispering, wondering, and Gryffindor rubies glistened on the floor like drops of blood as they made their way toward the marble staircase.

"We're going to the hospital wing," said Ginny.

"I'm not hurt," said Harry. !

"It's McGonagalls orders," said Ginny. "Everyone's up there, Ron and Hermione and Lupin and everyone -"

Fear stirred in Harry's chest again: He had forgotten the inert figures he had left behind.

"Ginny, who else is dead?"

"Don't worry, none of us."

"But the Dark Mark - Malfoy said he stepped over a body -"

"He stepped over Bill, but its all right, he's alive."

There was something in her voice, however, that Harry knew boded ill.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure . . . he's a - a bit of a mess, that's all. Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says he won't - won't look the same anymore. . . ."

Ginny's voice trembled a little.

"We don't really know what the aftereffects will be - I mean, Greyback being a werewolf, but not transformed at the time."

"But the others . . . There were other bodies on the ground. . . ."

"Neville and Professor Flitwick are both hurt, but Madam Pomfrey says they'll be all right. And a Death Eater's dead, he got hit by a Killing Curse that huge blond one was firing off everywhere - Harry, if we hadn't had your Felix potion, I think we'd all have been killed, but everything seemed to just miss us -"

They had reached the hospital wing. Pushing open the doors, Harry saw Neville lying, apparently asleep, in a bed near the door. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Tonks, and Lupin were gathered around another bed near the far end of the ward. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Hermione ran to Harry and hugged him; Lupin moved forward too, looking anxious.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm fine.... How's Bill?"

Nobody answered. Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill's pillow, so badly slashed and ripped that he looked grotesque. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at his wounds with some harsh-smelling green ointment. Harry remembered how Snape had mended Malfoy's Sectumsempra wounds so easily with his wand.

"Can't you fix them with a charm or something?" he asked the matron.

"No charm will work on these," said Madam Pomfrey. "I've tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites."

"But he wasn't bitten at the full moon," said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother's face as though he could somehow force him to mend just by staring. "Greyback hadn't transformed, so surely Bill won't be a - a real - ?" :

He looked uncertainly at Lupin.

"No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf," said Lupin, "but that does not mean that there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and - and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on."

"Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though," Ron said. "Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state -"

"Ron - Dumbledores dead," said Ginny.

"No!" Lupin looked wildly from Ginny to Harry, as though hoping the latter might contradict her, but when Harry did not, Lupin collapsed into a chair beside Bill's bed, his hands over his face. Harry had never seen Lupin lose control before; he felt as though he was intruding upon something private, indecent. He turned away and caught Ron's eye instead, exchanging in silence a look that confirmed what Ginny had said.

"How did he die?" whispered Tonks. "How did it happen?"

"Snape killed him," said Harry. "I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that's where the Mark was. . . . Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak - and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him -"

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron groaned. Luna's mouth trembled.

"- more Death Eaters arrived - and then Snape - and Snape did it. The Avada Kedavra." Harry couldn't go on.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, "Shh! Listen!"

Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. And Harry felt, as he had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside him, not without: It was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, he did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning, but it felt like a long time later that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of the recent battle: There were grazes on her face and her robes were ripped.

"Molly and Arthur are on their way," she said, and the spell of the music was broken: Everyone roused themselves as though coming out of trances, turning again to look at Bill, or else to rub their own eyes or shake their heads. "Harry, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore when he - when it happened. He says Professor Snape was involved in some -" "Snape killed Dumbledore," said Harry.

She stared at him for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, ran forward, conjuring a chair from thin air, which she pushed under McGonagall.

"Snape," repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. "We all wondered . . . but he trusted . . . always . . . Snape... I can't believe it. ..."

"Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens," said Lupin, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. "We always knew that."

"But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!" whispered Tonks. "I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn't. ..." .

"He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape," muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing at the corners of her leaking eyes with a tartan-edged handkerchief. "I mean . . . with Snapes history ... of course people were bound to wonder. . . but Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape's repentance was absolutely genuine-----Wouldn't hear a word against him!"

"I'd love to know what Snape told him to convince him," said Tonks.

"I know," said Harry, and they all turned to look at him. "Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort hunt down my mum and dad. Then Snape told Dumbledore he hadn't realized what he was doing, he was really sorry he'd done it, sorry that they were dead."

They all stared at him.

"And Dumbledore believed that?" said Lupin incredulously. "Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape hated James. . . ."

"And he didn't think my mother was worth a damn either," said Harry, "because she was Muggle-born... 'Mudblood,' he called her. ..."

Nobody asked how Harry knew this. All of them seemed to be lost in horrified shock, trying to digest the monstrous truth of what had happened.

"This is all my fault," said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. "My fault. I sent

Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn't alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined forces with the Death Eaters. I don't think he knew they were there before Filius told him, I don't think he knew they were coming."

"It isn't your fault, Minerva," said Lupin firmly. "We all wanted more help, we were glad to think Snape was on his way...."

"So when he arrived at the fight, he joined in on the Death Eaters' side?" asked Harry, who wanted every detail of Snape's duplicity and infamy, feverishly collecting more reasons to hate him, to swear vengeance.

"I don't know exactly how it happened," said Professor McGonagall distractedly. "It's all so confusing. . . . Dumbledore had told us that he would be leaving the school for a few hours and that we were to patrol the corridors just in case . . . Remus, Bill, and Nymphadora were to join us ... and so we patrolled. All seemed quiet. Every secret passageway out of the school was covered. We knew nobody could fly in. There were powerful enchantments on every entrance into the castle. I still don't know how the Death Eaters can possibly have entered. . . ."

"I do," said Harry, and he explained, briefly, about the pair of Vanishing Cabinets and the magical pathway they formed. "So they got in through the Room of Requirement."

Almost against his will he glanced from Ron to Hermione, both of whom looked devastated.

"I messed up, Harry," said Ron bleakly. "We did like you told us: We checked the Marauder's Map and we couldn't see Malfoy on it, so we thought he must be in the Room of Requirement, so me, Ginny, and Neville went to keep watch on it... but Malfoy got past us."

"He came out of the room about an hour after we started keeping watch," said Ginny. "He was on his own, clutching that awful shriveled arm -"

"His Hand of Glory," said Ron. "Gives light only to the holder, remember?"

"Anyway," Ginny went on, "he must have been checking whether the coast was clear to let the Death Eaters out, because the moment he saw us he threw something into the air and it all went pitch-black -"

"- Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," said Ron bitterly. "Fred and George's. I'm going to be having a word with them about who they let buy their products."

"We tried everything, Lumos, Incendio," said Ginny. "Nothing would penetrate the darkness; all we could do was grope our way out of the corridor again, and meanwhile we could hear people rushing past us. Obviously Malfoy could see because of that hand thing and was guiding them, but we didn't dare use any curses or anything in case we hit each other, and by the time we'd reached a corridor that was light, they'd gone."

"Luckily," said Lupin hoarsely, "Ron, Ginny, and Neville ran into us almost immediately and told us what had happened. We found the Death Eaters minutes later, heading in the direction of the Astronomy Tower. Malfoy obviously hadn't expected more people to be on the watch; he seemed to have exhausted his supply of Darkness Powder, at any rate. A fight broke out, they scattered and we gave chase. One of them, Gibbon, broke away and headed up the tower stairs -"

"To set off the Mark?" asked Harry.

"He must have done, yes, they must have arranged that before they left the Room of Requirement," said Lupin. "But I don't think Gibbon liked the idea of waiting up there alone for Dumbledore, because he came running back downstairs to rejoin the fight and was hit by a Killing Curse that just missed me."

"So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville," said Harry, turning to Hermione, "were you - ?"

"Outside Snape's office, yes," whispered Hermione, her eyes sparkling with tears, "with Luna. We hung around for ages outside it and nothing happened. . . . We didn't know what was going on upstairs, Ron had taken the map-----It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down into the dungeons. He was shouting about Death Eaters in the castle, I don't think he really registered that Luna and I were there at all, he just burst his way into Snape's office and we heard him saying that Snape had to go back with him and help and then we heard a loud thump and Snape came

hurtling out of his room and he saw us and - and -" "What?" Harry urged her.

"I was so stupid, Harry!" said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. "He said Professor Flitwick had collapsed and that we should go and take care of him while he - while he went to help fight the Death Eaters -" She covered her face in shame and continued to talk into her fingers, so that her voice was muffled. "We went into his office to see if we could help Professor Flitwick and found him unconscious on the floor. . . and oh, it's so obvious now, Snape must have Stupefied Flitwick, but we didn't realize, Harry, we didn't realize, we just let Snape go!"

"It's not your fault," said Lupin firmly. "Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you and Luna."

"So then he came upstairs," said Harry, who was watching Snape running up the marble staircase in his mind's eye, his black robes billowing behind him as ever, pulling his wand from under his cloak as he ascended, "and he found the place where you were all fighting. ..."

"We were in trouble, we were losing," said Tonks in a low voice. "Gibbon was down, but the rest of the Death Eaters seemed ready to fight to the death. Neville had been hurt, Bill had been savaged by Greyback... It was all dark . . . curses flying everywhere . . . The Malfoy boy had vanished, he must have slipped past, up the stairs . . . then more of them ran after him, but one of them blocked the stair behind them with some kind of curse. . . . Neville ran at it and got thrown up into the air -"

"None of us could break through," said Ron, "and that massive Death Eater was still firing off jinxes all over the place, they were bouncing off the walls and barely missing us. . . ."

"And then Snape was there," said Tonks, "and then he wasn't -"

"I saw him running toward us, but that huge Death Eaters jinx just missed me right afterward and I ducked and lost track of things," said Ginny.

"I saw him run straight through the cursed barrier as though it wasn't there," said Lupin. "I tried to follow him, but was thrown back just like Neville. . . ."

"He must have known a spell we didn't," whispered McGonagall. "After all - he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. ... I just assumed that he was in a hurry to chase after the Death Eaters who'd escaped up to the tower. ..."

"He was," said Harry savagely, "but to help them, not to stop them . . . and I'll bet you had to have a Dark Mark to get through that barrier - so what happened when he came back down?"

"Well, the big Death Eater had just fired off a hex that caused half the ceiling to fall in, and also broke the curse blocking the stairs," said Lupin. "We all ran forward - those of us who were still standing anyway - and then

Snape and the boy emerged out of the dust - obviously, none of us attacked them -"

"We just let them pass," said Tonks in a hollow voice. "We thought they were being chased by the Death Eaters - and next thing, the other Death Eaters and Greyback were back and we were fighting again - I thought I heard Snape shout something, but I don't know what -"

"He shouted, 'It's over,'" said Harry. "He'd done what he'd meant to do."

They all fell silent. Fawkes's lament was still echoing over the dark grounds outside. As the music reverberated upon the air, unbidden, unwelcome thoughts slunk into Harry's mind. . . . Had they taken Dumbledore's body from the foot of the tower yet? What would happen to it next? Where would it rest? He clenched his fists tightly in his pockets. He could feel the small cold lump of the fake Horcrux against the knuckles of his right hand.

The doors of the hospital wing burst open, making them all jump: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were striding up the ward, Fleur just behind them, her beautiful face terrified.

"Molly - Arthur -" said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. "I am so sorry -"

"Bill," whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill's mangled face. "Oh, Bill!"

Lupin and Tonks had got up hastily and retreated so that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could get nearer to the bed. Mrs. Weasley bent over her son and pressed her lips to his bloody forehead.

"You said Greyback attacked him?" Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. "But he hadn't transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?"

"We don't yet know," said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

"There will probably be some contamination, Arthur," said Lupin. "It is an odd case, possibly unique. . . . We don't know what his behavior might be like when he awakens. . . ."

Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill's wounds.

"And Dumbledore ..." said Mr. Weasley. "Minerva, is it true ... Is he really. . . ?"

As Professor McGonagall nodded, Harry felt Ginny move beside him and looked at her. Her slightly narrowed eyes were fixed upon Fleur, who was gazing down at Bill with a frozen expression on her face.

"Dumbledore gone," whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling onto Bill's mutilated face.

"Of course, it doesn't matter how he looks. . . . It's not r-really important. . . but he was a very handsome little b-boy . . . always very handsome . . . and he was g-going to be married!"

"And what do you mean by zat?" said Fleur suddenly and loudly. "What do you mean, ' he was going to be married?'"

Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. "Well -only that-"

"You thenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?" demanded Fleur. "You thenk, because of these bites, he will not love me?"

"No, that's not what I -"

"Because 'e will!" said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. "It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!"

"Well, yes, I'm sure," said Mrs. Weasley, "but I thought perhaps - given how - how he -"

"You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per'aps, you hoped?" said Fleur, her nostrils flaring. "What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!" she added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill's wounds with a most curious expression upon her face. Nobody said anything; Harry did not dare move. Like everybody else, he was waiting for the explosion.

"Our Great-Auntie Muriel," said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, "has a very beautiful tiara - goblin-made - which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair."

"Thank you," said Fleur stiffly. "I am sure zat will be lovely."

And then, Harry did not quite see how it happened, both , women were crying and hugging each other. Completely bewildered, wondering whether the world had gone mad, he turned around: Ron looked as stunned as he felt and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks.

"You see!" said a strained voice. Tonks was glaring at Lupin. "She still wants to marry him, even though he's been bitten! She doesn't care!"

"It's different," said Lupin, barely moving his lips and looking suddenly tense. "Bill will not be a full werewolf. The cases are completely -"

"But I don't care either, I don't care!" said Tonks, seizing the front of Lupin's robes and shaking them. "I've told you a million times. . . ."

And the meaning of Tonks's Patronus and her mouse-colored hair, and the reason she had come running to find Dumbledore when she had heard a rumor someone had been attacked by Greyback, all suddenly became clear to Harry; it had not been Sirius that Tonks had fallen in love with after all.

"And I've told you a million times," said Lupin, refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the floor, "that I am too old for you, too poor . . . too dangerous. . . ."

"I've said all along you're taking a ridiculous line on this, Remus," said Mrs. Weasley over Fleur's shoulder as she patted her on the back.

"I am not being ridiculous," said Lupin steadily. "Tonks deserves somebody young and whole."

"But she wants you," said Mr. Weasley, with a small smile. "And after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily remain so."

He gestured sadly at his son, lying between them.

"This is... not the moment to discuss it," said Lupin, avoiding everybody's eyes as he looked around distractedly. "Dumbledore is dead. ..."

"Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world," said Professor McGonagall curtly, just as the hospital doors opened again and Hagrid walked in.

The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, spotted handkerchief in his hand.

"I've . . . I've done it, Professor," he choked. "M-moved him. Professor Sprout's got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick's lyin down, but he says he'll be all righ' in a jiffy, an' Professor Slughorn says the Ministry's bin informed."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill's bed. "I shall have to see the Ministry when they get here. Hagrid, please tell the Heads of Houses - Slughorn can represent Slytherin - that I want to see them in my office forthwith. I would like you to join us too."

As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked down at Harry. "Before I meet them I would like a quick word with you, Harry. If you'll come with me. ..."

Harry stood up, murmured "See you in a bit" to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and followed Professor McGonagall back down the ward. The corridors outside were deserted and the only sound was the distant phoenix song. It was several minutes before Harry became aware that they were not heading for Professor McGonagall's office, but for Dumbledore's, and another few seconds before he realized that of course, she had been deputy headmistress, . . . Apparently she was now headmistress ... so the room behind the gargoyle was now hers.

In silence they ascended the moving spiral staircase and entered the circular office. He did not know what he had expected: that the room would be draped in black, perhaps, or even that Dumbledore's body might be lying there. In fact, it looked almost exactly as it had done when he and Dumbledore had left it mere hours previously: the silver instruments whirring and puffing on their spindle legged tables, Gryffindor's sword in its glass case gleaming in the moonlight, the Sorting Hat on a shelf behind the desk, the Fawkes's perch stood empty, he was still crying his lament to the grounds. And a new portrait had joined the ranks of the dead headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts: Dumbledore was slumbering in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacle perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled.

After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then rounded the desk to look at Harry, her face taut and lined.

"Harry," she said, "I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the school."

"I can't tell you that, Professor," said Harry. He had expected the question and had his answer ready. It had been here, in this very room, that Dumbledore had told him that he was to confide the contents of their lessons to nobody but Ron and Hermione.

"Harry, it might be important," said Professor McGonagall.

"It is," said Harry, "very, but he didn't want me to tell anyone."

Professor McGonagall glared at him. "Potter" - Harry registered the renewed use of his surname - "in the light of Professor Dumbledore's death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat -"

"I don't think so," said Harry, shrugging. "Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died." But -

"There's one thing you should know before the Ministry gets here, though. Madam Rosmerta's under the Imperius Curse, she was helping Malfoy and the Death Eaters, that's how the necklace and the poisoned mead -"

"Rosmerta?" said Professor McGonagall incredulously, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door behind them and Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Slughorn traipsed into the room, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief.

"Snape!" ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. "Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him!"

But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: A sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe had just walked back into his empty canvas. "Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry."

"Thank you, Everard," said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers.

"I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here," she said quickly. "Personally, I am not convinced that the school should reopen next year. The death of the headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts's history. It is horrible."

"I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to remain open," said Professor Sprout. "I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil."

"But will we have a single pupil after this?" said Slughorn, now dabbing his sweating brow with a silken handkerchief. "Parents will want to keep their children at home and I can't say I blame them. Personally, I don't think we're in more danger at Hogwarts than we are anywhere else, but you can't expect mothers to think like that. They'll want to keep their families together, it's only natural."

"I agree," said Professor McGonagall. "And in any case, it is not true to say that Dumbledore never envisaged a situation in which Hogwarts might close. When the Chamber of Secrets reopened he considered the closure of the school - and I must say that Professor Dumbledore's murder is more disturbing to me than the idea of Slytherin's monster living undetected in the bowels of the castle. . . ."

"We must consult the governors," said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice; he had a large bruise on his forehead but seemed otherwise unscathed by his collapse in Snape's office. "We must follow the established procedures. A decision should not be made hastily."

"Hagrid, you haven't said anything," said Professor McGonagall. "What are your views, ought Hogwarts to remain open?"

Hagrid, who had been weeping silently into his large, spotted handkerchief throughout this conversation, now raised puffy red eyes and croaked, "I dunno, Professor . . . that's fer the Heads of House an the headmistress ter decide ..."

"Professor Dumbledore always valued your views," said Professor McGonagall kindly, "and so do I."

"Well, I'm stayin'," said Hagrid, fat tears still leaking out of the corners of his eyes and trickling down into his tangled beard. "It's me home, it's bin me home since I was thirteen. An' if there's kids who wan' me ter teach 'em, I'll

do it. But... I dunno ... Hogwarts without Dumbledore .. ." He gulped and disappeared behind his handkerchief once more, and there was silence.

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall, glancing out of the window at the grounds, checking to see whether the Minister was yet approaching, "then I must agree with Filius that the right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will make the final decision.

"Now, as to getting students home . . . there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for the Hogwarts Express to come tomorrow if necessary -"

"What about Dumbledore's funeral?" said Harry, speaking at last.

"Well. . ." said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. "I - I know that it was Dumbledore's wish to be laid to rest here, at Hogwarts -"

"Then that's what'll happen, isn't it?" said Harry fiercely.

"If the Ministry thinks it appropriate," said Professor McGonagall. "No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been -"

"No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school," growled Hagrid.

"Hogwarts should be Dumbledore's final resting place," said Professor Flitwick.

"Absolutely," said Professor Sprout.

"And in that case," said Harry, "you shouldn't send the students home until the funeral's over. They'll want to say -"

The last word caught in his throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for him. "Good-bye."

"Well said," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange transport home afterward."

"Seconded," barked Professor Sprout.]

"I suppose ... yes .. ." said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

"He's coming," said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. "The Minister . . . and by the looks of it. he's brought a delegation . . ."

"Can I leave, Professor?" said Harry at once.

He had no desire at all to see, or be interrogated by, Rufus Scrimgeour tonight.

"You may," said Professor McGonagall. "And quickly."

She strode toward the door and held it open for him. He sped down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor; he had left his Invisibility Cloak at the top of the Astronomy Tower, but it did not matter; there was nobody in the corridors to see him pass, not even Filch, Mrs. Norris, or Peeves. He did not meet another soul until he turned into the passage leading to the Gryffindor common room.

"Is it true?" whispered the Fat Lady as he approached her. "It is really true? Dumbledore - dead?"

"Yes," said Harry.

She let out a wail and, without waiting for the password, swung forward to admit him.

As Harry had suspected it would be, the common room was jam-packed. The room fell silent as he climbed through the portrait hole. He saw Dean and Seamus sitting in a group nearby: This meant that the dormitory must be empty, or nearly so. Without speaking to anybody, without making eye contact at all, Harry walked straight across the room and through the door to the boys' dormitories.

As he had hoped, Ron was waiting for him, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. Harry sat down on his own four-poster and for a moment, they simply stared at each other.

"They're talking about closing the school," said Harry.

"Lupin said they would," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"So?" said Ron in a very low voice, as though he thought the furniture might be listening in. "Did you find one? Did you get it? A - a Horcrux?"

Harry shook his head. All that had taken place around that black lake seemed like an old nightmare now; had it really happened, and only hours ago?

"You didn't get it?" said Ron, looking crestfallen. "It wasn't there?"

"No," said Harry. "Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place."

"Already taken - ?"

Wordlessly, Harry pulled the fake locket from his pocket, opened it, and passed it to Ron. The full story could wait. ... It did not matter tonight. . .

nothing mattered except the end, the end of their pointless adventure, the end of Dumbledore's life. . . .

"R.A.B.," whispered Ron, "but who was that?"

"Dunno," said Harry, lying back on his bed fully clothed and staring blankly upwards. He felt no curiosity at all about R.A.B.: He doubted that he would ever feel curious again. As he lay there, he became aware suddenly that the grounds were silent. Fawkes had stopped singing. And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that the phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had left the school, had left the world . . . had left Harry.

Chapter 30: The White Tomb

All lessons were suspended, all examinations postponed. Some students were hurried away from Hogwarts by their parents over the next couple of days - the Patil twins were gone before breakfast on the morning following Dumbledore's death and Zacharias Smith was escorted from the castle by his haughty-looking father. Seamus Finnigan, on the other hand, refused point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the Entrance Hall which was resolved when she agreed that he could remain behind for the funeral. She had difficulty in finding a bed in Hogsmeade, Seamus told Harry and Ron, for wizards and witches were pouring into the village, preparing to pay their last respects to Durnbledore.

Some excitement was caused among the younger students, who had never seen it before, when a powder-blue carriage the size of a house, pulled by a dozen giant winged palo-minos, came soaring out of the sky in the late afternoon before the funeral and landed on the edge of the Forest. Harry watched from a window as a gigantic and handsome olive-skinned, black-haired woman descended the carriage steps and threw herself into the waiting Hagrid's arms. Meanwhile a delegation of Ministry officials, including the Minister for Magic himself, was being accommodated within the castle. Harry was diligently avoiding contact with any of them; he

was sure that, sooner or later, he would be asked again to account for Dumbledore's last excursion from Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were spending all of their time together. The beautiful weather seemed to mock them; Harry could imagine how it would have been if Durnbledore had not died, and they had had this time together at the very end of the year, Ginny's examinations finished, the pressure of homework lifted ... and hour by hour, he put off saying the thing that he knew he must say, doing what he knew it was right to do, because it was too hard to forgo his best source of comfort.

They visited the hospital wing twice a day: Neville had been discharged, but Bill remained under Madam Pomfrey's care. His scars were as bad as ever; in truth, he now bore a distinct resemblance to Mad-Eye Moody, though thankfully with both eyes and legs, but in personality he seemed just the same as ever. All that appeared to have changed was that he now had a great liking for very rare steaks.

'... so eet ees lucky 'e is marrying me,' said Fleur happily, plumping up Bill's pillows, 'because ze British overcook their meat, I 'ave always said this.'

'I suppose I'm just going to have to accept that he really is going to marry her,' sighed Ginny later that evening, as she, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat beside the open window of the Gryffindor common room, looking out over the twilit grounds,

'She's not that bad,' said Harry. 'Ugly, though,' he added hastily, as Ginny raised her eyebrows, and she let out a reluctant giggle.

'Well, I suppose if Mum can stand it, I can.'

'Anyone else we know died?' Ron asked Hermione, who was perusing the Evening Prophet.

Hermione winced at the forced toughness in his voice.

'No,' she said reprovably, folding up the newspaper. 'They're still looking for Snape, but no sign ...'

'Of course there isn't,' said Harry, who became angry every time this subject cropped up. 'They won't find Snape till they find Voldemort, and seeing as they've never managed to do that in all this time ...'

'I'm going to go to bed,' yawned Ginny. 'I haven't been sleeping that well since ... well ... I could do with some sleep.'

She kissed Harry (Ron looked away pointedly), waved at the other two and departed for the girls' dormitories. The moment the door had closed behind her, Hermione leaned forwards towards Harry with a most Hermione-ish look on her face.

'Harry, I found something out (this morning, in the library ...'

'R.A.B.?' said Harry, sitting up straight.

He did not feel the way he had so often felt before, excited, curious, burning to get to the bottom of a mystery; he simply knew that the task of discovering the truth about the real Horcrux had to be completed before he could move a little further along the dark and winding path stretching ahead of him, the path that he and Dumbledore had set out upon together, and which he now knew he would have to journey alone. There might still be as many as four Horcruxes out there somewhere and each would need to be found and eliminated before there was even a possibility that Voldemort could be killed. He kept reciting their names to himself, as though by listing them he could bring them within reach: 'the locket ..., the cup ... the snake ... something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's ... the locket ... the cup ... the snake ... something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's ...'

This mantra seemed to pulse through Harry's mind as he

fell asleep at night, and his dreams were thick with cups, locket and mysterious objects that he could not quite reach, though Dumbledore helpfully offered Harry a rope ladder that turned to snakes the moment he began to climb ...

He had shown Hermione the note inside the locket the morning after Dumbledore's death, and although she had not immediately recognised the initials as belonging to some obscure wizard about whom she had been reading, she had since been rushing off to the library a little more often than was strictly necessary for somebody who had no homework to do.

'No,' she said sadly, 'I've been trying, Harry, but I haven't found anything ... there are a couple of reasonably well-known wizards with those initials - Rosalind Antigone Bungles ... Rupert "Axebanger" Brookstanton ... but they don't seem to fit at all. Judging by that note, the person who stole the Horcrux knew Voldemort, and I can't find a shred of evidence that Bungles or Axebanger ever had anything to do with him ... no, actually, it's about ... well, Snape.'

She looked nervous even saying the name again.

'What about him?' asked Harry heavily, slumping back in his chair.

'Well, it's just that I was sort of right about the Half-Blood Prince business,' she said tentatively.

'Do you have to rub it in, Hermione? How do you think I feel about that now?'

'No - no - Harry, I didn't mean that!' she said hastily, looking around to check that they were not being overheard. 'It's just that I was right about Eileen Prince once owning the book. You see ... she was Snape's mother!'

'I thought she wasn't much of a looker,' said Ron. Hermione ignored him.

'I was going through the rest of the old Prophets and there

was a tiny announcement about Eileen Prince marrying a man called Tobias Snape, and then later an announcement saying that she'd given birth to a -'

'- murderer,' spat Harry.

'Well ... yes,' said Hermione. 'So ... I was sort of right. Snape must have been proud of being "half a Prince", you see? Tobias Snape was a Muggie from what it said in the Prophet'

'Yeah, that fits,' said Harry. 'He'd play up the pure-blood side so he could get in with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of them ... he's just like Voldemort. Pure-blood mother, Muggie father ... ashamed of his parentage, trying to make himself feared using the Dark Arts, gave himself an impressive new name - Lord Voldemort - the Half-Blood Prince - how could Dumbledore have missed -?'

He broke off, looking out of the window. He could not stop himself dwelling upon Dumbledore's inexcusable trust in Snape ... but as Hermione had just inadvertently reminded him, he, Harry, had been taken in just the same ... in spite of the increasing nastiness of those scribbled spells, he had refused to believe ill of the boy who had been so clever, who had helped him so much ...

Helped him ... it was an almost unendurable thought, now ...

'I still don't get why he didn't turn you in for using that book,' said Ron. 'He must've known where you were getting it ali from.'

'He knew,' said Harry bitterly. 'He knew when I used Secfumsempra. He didn't really need Legilimency ... he might even have known before then, with Slughom talking about how brilliant I was at Potions ... shouldn't have left his old book in the bottom of that cupboard, should he?'

'But why didn't he turn you in?'

'I don't ithink he wanted to associate himself with that book,' said Hermione. 'I don't think Dumbledore would have liked it very much if he'd known. And even if Snape pre-tended it hadn't been his, Slughom would have recognised his writing at once. Anyway, the book was left in Snape's old classroom, and I'll bet Dumbledore knew his mother was called "Prince".'

T should've shown the book to Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'All that lime he was showing me how Voldemort was evil even when he was at school, and I had proof Snape was, too -'

""Evil" is a strong word,' said Hermione quietly.

'You were the one who kept telling me the book was dangerous!'

'I'm trying to say, Harry, that you're pulling too much blame on yourself. I thought the Prince seemed to have a nasty sense of humour, but I would never have guessed he was a potential killer ...'

'None of us could've guessed Snape would ... you know,' said Ron.

Silence fell between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts, but Harry was sure that they, like him, were think-ing about the following morning, when Dumbledore's body would be laid to rest. Harry had never attended a funeral before; there had been no body to bury when Sirius had died. He did not know what to expect and was a little worried about what he might see, about how he would feel. He won-dered whether Dumbledore's death would be more real to him once the funeral was over. Though he had moments when the horrible fact of it threatened to overwhelm him, there were blank stretches of numbness where, despite the fact that nobody was talking about anything else in the whole castle, he still found it difficult 10 believe that Dumbledore

had really gone. Admittedly he had not, as he had with Sirius, looked desperately for some kind of loophole, some way that Dumbledore would come back ... he felt in his pocket for the cold chain of the fake Horcrux, which he now carried with him everywhere, not as a talisman, but as a reminder of what it had cost and what remained still to do.

Harry rose early to pack the next day; the Hogwarts Express would be leaving an hour after the funeral. Down-stairs he found the mood in the Great Hall subdued. Every-body was wearing their dress robes and no one

seemed very hungry. Professor McGonagall had left the thronelike chair in the middle of the staff table empty. Hagrid's chair was deserted too: Harry thought that perhaps he had not been able to face breakfast; but Snape's place had been unceremoniously filled by Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry avoided his yellowish eyes as they scanned the Hall; Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Scrimgeour was looking for him. Among Scrimgeour's entourage Harry spotted the red hair and horn-rimmed glasses of Percy Weasley. Ron gave no sign that he was aware of Percy, apart from stabbing pieces of kipper with unwonted venom.

Over at the Slytherin table Crabbe and Goyle were muttering together. Hulking boys though they were, they looked oddly lonely without the tall, pale figure of Malfoy between them, bossing them around. Harry had not spared Malfoy much thought. His animosity was all for Snape, but he had not forgotten the fear in Malfoy's voice on that Tower top, nor the fact that he had lowered his wand before the other Death Eaters arrived. Harry did not believe that Malfoy would have killed Dumbledore. He despised Malfoy still for his infatuation with the Dark Arts, but now the tiniest drop of pity mingled with his dislike. Where, Harry wondered, was Malfoy now, and what was Voldemort making him do under threat of killing him and his parents? ? ●●>.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a nudge in the ribs from Ginny. Professor McGonagall had risen to her feet and the mournful hum in the Hall died away at once.

'It is nearly time,' she said. 'Please follow your Heads of House out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me.'

They filed out from behind their benches in near silence. Harry glimpsed Slughorn at the head of the Slytherin column, wearing magnificent long emerald-green robes embroidered with silver. He had never seen Professor Sprout, Head of the Hufflepuffs, looking so clean; there was not a single patch on her hat, and when they reached the Entrance Hall, they found Madam Pince standing beside Filch, she in a thick black veil that fell to her knees, he in an ancient black suit and tie reeking of mothballs.

They were heading, as Harry saw when he stepped out on to the stone steps from the front doors, towards the lake. The warmth of the sun caressed his face as they followed Professor McGonagall in silence to the place where hundreds of chairs had been set out in rows. An aisle ran down the centre of them: there was a marble table standing at the front, all chairs facing it. It was the most beautiful summer's day.

An extraordinary assortment of people had already settled into half of the chairs: shabby and smart, old and young. Most Harry did not recognise, but there were a few that he did, including members of the Order of the Phoenix: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks, her hair miraculously returned to vividest pink, Remus Lupin, with whom she seemed to be holding hands, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Bill supported by Fleur and followed by Fred and George, who were wearing jackets of black dragonskin. Then there was Madame Maxime, who took up two-and-a-half chairs on her own,

Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron, Arabella Figg, Harry's Squib neighbour, the hairy bass player from the

wizarding group the Weird Sisters, Ernie Prang, driver of the Knight Bus, Madam Malkin, of the robe shop in Diagon Alley, and some people whom Harry merely knew by sight, such as the barman of the Hog's Head and the witch who pushed the trolley on the Hogwarts Express. The castle ghosts were there too, barely visible in the bright sunlight, discernible only when they moved, shimmering insubstantially in the gleaming air.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny filed into seats at the end of a row beside the lake. People were whispering to each other; it sounded like a breeze in the grass, but the birdsong was louder by far. The crowd continued to swell; with a great rush of affection for both of them, Harry saw Neville being helped into a seat by Luna. They alone of all the DA had responded to Hermione's summons the night that Dumbledore had died, and Harry knew why: they were the ones who had missed the DA most ... probably the ones who had checked their coins regularly in the hope that there would be another meeting ...

Cornelius Fudge walked past them towards the front rows, his expression miserable, twirling his green bowler hat as usual; Harry next recognised Rita Skeeter, who, he was infuriated to see, had a notebook clutched in her red-tanned hand; and then, with a worse jolt of fury, Dolores Umbridge, an unconvincing expression of grief upon her toadlike face, a black velvet bow set atop her iron-coloured curls. At the sight of the centaur Firenze, who was

standing like a sentinel near the water's edge, she gave a start and scurried hastily into a seat a good distance away.

The staff were seated at last. Harry could see Scrimgeour looking grave and dignified in the front row with Professor McGonagall. He wondered whether Scrimgeour or any of these important people were really sorry that Dumbledore was and he forgot his dislike of the Ministry in looking around for the source of it. He was not the only one: many heads were turning, searching, a little alarmed.

'In there,' whispered Ginny in Harry's ear.

And he saw them in the clear green sunlit water, inches below the surface, reminding him horribly of the Inferi; a chorus of merpeople singing in a strange language he did not understand, their pallid faces rippling, their purplish hair flowing all around them. The music made the hair on Harry's neck stand up and yet it was not unpleasant. It spoke very clearly of loss and of despair. As he looked down into the wild faces of the singers he had the feeling that they, at least, were sorry for Dumbledore's passing. Then Ginny nudged him again and he looked round.

Hagrid was walking slowly up the aisle between the chairs. He was crying quite silently, his face gleaming with tears, and in his arms, wrapped in purple velvet spangled with golden stars, was what Harry knew to be Dumbledore's body. A sharp pain rose in Harry's throat at this sight: for a moment, the strange music and the knowledge that Dumbledore's body was so close seemed to take all warmth from the day. Ron looked white and

shocked. Tears were falling thick and fast into both Ginny and Hermione's laps.

They could not see clearly what was happening at the front. Hagrid seemed to have placed the body carefully upon the table. Now he retreated down the aisle, blowing his nose with loud trumpeting noises that drew scandalised looks from some, including, Harry saw, Dolores Umbridge ... but Harry knew that Dumbledore would not have cared. He tried to make a friendly gesture to Hagrid as he passed, but Hagrid's eyes were so swollen it was a wonder he could see where he was going. Harry glanced at the back row to which Hagrid

was heading and realised what was guiding him, for there, dressed in a jacket and trousers each the size of a small mar-quee, was the giant Grawp, his great ugly boulder-like head bowed, docile, almost human. Hagrid sat down next to his half-brother and Grawp palled Hagrid hard on the head, so that his chair legs sank into the ground. Harry had a wonderful momentary urge to laugh. But then the music stopped and he turned to face the front again.

A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes had got to his feet and stood now in front of Dumbledore's body. Harry could not hear what he was saying. Odd words floated back to them over the hundreds of heads. 'Nobility of spirit' ... 'intellectual contribution' ... 'greatness of heart' ... it did not mean very much. It had little to do with Dumbledore as Harry had known him. He suddenly remembered Dumbledore's idea of a few words:

'nitwit', 'oddment', 'blubber' and 'tweak 1, and again, had to suppress a grin ... what was the matter with him?

There was a soft splashing noise to his left and he saw that the merpeople had broken the surface to listen, too. He remembered Dumbledore crouching at the water's edge two years ago, very close to where Harry now sat, and conversing in Mermish with the Merchieftainess. Harry wondered where Dumbledore had learned Mermish. There was so much he had never asked him, so much he should have said ...

And then, without warning, it swept over him, the dreadful truth, more completely and undeniably than it had until now. Dumbledore was dead, gone ... he clutched the cold locket in his hand so tightly that it hurt, but he could not prevent hot tears spilling from his eyes: he looked away from Ginny and the others and stared out over the lake, towards the Forest, as the little man in black droned on ... there was movement among the trees. The centaurs had come to pay their respects, too. They did not move into the open but Harry saw them

standing quite still, half-hidden in shadow, watching the wiz-ards, their bows hanging at their sides. And Harry remembered his first nightmarish trip into the Forest, the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had discussed fighting a losing battle not long thereafter. It was important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated ...

And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun how people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather, and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon for ever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one: that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died and he was more alone than he had ever been before.

The little man in black had stopped speaking at last and resumed his seat. Harry waited for somebody else to get to their feet; he expected speeches, probably from the Minister, but nobody moved.

Then several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table upon which it lay: higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiralled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix fly joyfully into the blue, but next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd. It was, Harry knew, the centaurs' tribute: he saw them turn tail and disappear back into the cool trees.

Likewise the mer-people sank slowly back into the green water and were lost from view.

Harry looked at Ginny, Ron and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight was blinding him. Hermione's face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment they understood each other perfectly, and that when he told her what he was going to do now, she would not say 'Be careful', or 'Don't do it', but accept his decision, because she would not have expected anything less of him. And so he steeled himself to say what he had known he must say ever since Dumbledore had died.

'Ginny, listen ...' he said very quietly, as the buzz of conversation grew louder around them and people began to get to their feet. 'I can't be involved with you any more. We've got to stop seeing each other. We can't be together.'

She said, with an oddly twisted smile, 'It's for some stupid, noble reason, isn't it?'

'It's been like ... like something out of someone else's life, these last few weeks with you,' said Harry. 'But I can't ... we can't ... I've got things to do alone now.'

She did not cry, she simply looked at him,

'Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to. He's already used you as bait once, and that was just because you're my best friend's sister. Think how much danger you'll be in if we keep this up. He'll know, he'll find out. He'll try and get to me through you.'

'What if I don't care?' said Ginny fiercely.

'I care,' said Harry. 'How do you think I'd feel if this was your funeral ... and it was my fault ...'

She looked away from him, over the lake.

'I never really gave up on you,' she said. 'Not really. I always hoped ... Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was a bit more - myself.'

'Smart girl, that Hermione,' said Harry, trying to smile. 'I just wish I'd asked you sooner. We could've had ages ... months ... years maybe ...'

'But you've been too busy saving the wizarding world,' said Ginny, half-laughing. 'Well ... I can't say I'm surprised. I knew this would happen in the end. I knew you wouldn't be happy unless you were hunting Voldemort. Maybe that's why I like you so much.'

Harry could not bear to hear these things, nor did he think his resolution would hold if he remained sitting beside her. Ron, he saw, was now holding Hermione and stroking her hair while she sobbed into his shoulder, tears dripping from the end of his own long nose. With a miserable gesture, Harry got up, turned his back on Ginny and on Dumbledore's tomb and walked away around the lake. Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still: just as setting out as soon as possible to track down the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort would feel better than waiting to do it ...

'Harry!'

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly towards him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

'I've been hoping to have a word ... do you mind if I walk a little way with you?'

'No,' said Harry indifferently, and set off again.

'Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy,' said Scrimgeour quietly, 'I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very great wizard. We had our disagreements, as you know, but no one knows better than I -'

•'What do you want?' asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed but, as before, hastily modified his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

'You are, of course, devastated,' he said. 'I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been his favourite ever pupil. The bond between the two of you -'

'What do you want?' Harry repeated, coming to a halt.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick and stared at Harry, his expression shrewd now.

'The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died.'

'Whose word?' said Harry.

'Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the Tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Harry.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Harry. 'Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn't want people to know.'

'Such loyalty is admirable, of course,' said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, 'but Dumbledore is gone, Harry. He's gone.'

'He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him,' said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

'My dear boy ... even Dumbledore cannot return from the-'

'I am not saying he can. You wouldn't understand. But I've got nothing to tell you.'

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently

supposed to be a tone of delicacy, 'The Ministry can offer you all sorts of protection, you know, Harry. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service -'

Harry laughed.

'Voldemort wants to kill me himself and Aurors won't stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thanks.'

'So,' said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, 'the request I made of you at Christmas -'

'What request? Oh yeah ... the one where I tell the world what a great job you're doing in exchange for —'

'- for raising everyone's morale!' snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

'Released Stan Shunpike yet?'

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple colour highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon.

'I see you are -'

'Dumbledore's man through and through,' said Harry. 'That's right.'

Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see Percy and the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting for him, casting nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Ron and Hermione were hurrying towards Harry, passing Scrimgeour going in the opposite direction; Harry turned and walked slowly on, waiting for them to catch up, which they finally did in the shade of a beech tree under which they had sat in happier times.

"What did Scrimgeour want?' Hermione whispered.

'Same as he wanted at Christmas,' shrugged Harry. 'Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and be the Ministry's new poster boy.'

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, 'Look, let me go back and hit Percy!'

'No,' she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

'It'll make me feel better!'

Harry laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

'I can't bear the idea that we might never come back.' she said softly. 'How can Hogwarts close?'

'Maybe it won't,' said Ron. 'We're not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere's the same now. I'd even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d'you reckon, Harry?'

'I'm not coming back even if it does reopen,' said Harry.

Ron gaped at him, but Hermione said sadly, 'I knew you were going to say that. But then what will you do?'

'I'm going back to the Dursleys' once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to,' said Harry. 'But it'll be a short visit, and then I'll be gone for good.'

'But where will you go if you don't come back to school?'

'I thought I might go back to Godric's Hollow,' Harry muttered. He had had the idea in his head ever since the night of Dumbledore's death. 'For me, it started there, all of it. I've just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents' graves, I'd like that.'

'And then what?' said Ron.

Then I've got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven't I?' said Harry, his eyes upon Dumbledore's white tomb, reflected in the water on the other side of the lake. That's what he wanted me to do, that's why he told me all about them. If Dumbledore was right - and I'm sure he was -there are still four of them out there. I've got to find them and destroy them and then I've got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the one who's going to kill him. And if I meet Severus Snape

along the way,' he added, 'so much the better for me, so much the worse for him.'

There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp a wide berth as he cuddled Hagrid, whose howls of grief were still echoing across the water.

'We'll be there, Harry,' said Ron.

'What?'

At your aunt and uncle's house,' said Ron. 'And then we'll go with you, wherever you're going.'

'No -' said Harry quickly; he had not counted on this, he had meant them to understand that he was undertaking this most dangerous journey alone.

'You said to us once before,' said Hermione quietly, 'that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we?'

'We're with you whatever happens,' said Ron. 'But, mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow.'

'Why?'

'Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?'

Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful.

'Yeah, we shouldn't miss that,' he said finally.

His hand closed automatically around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path he saw stretching ahead for himself, in spite of the final meet-ing with Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thought

that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione.

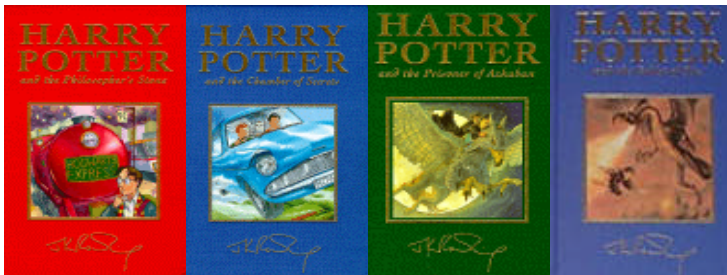
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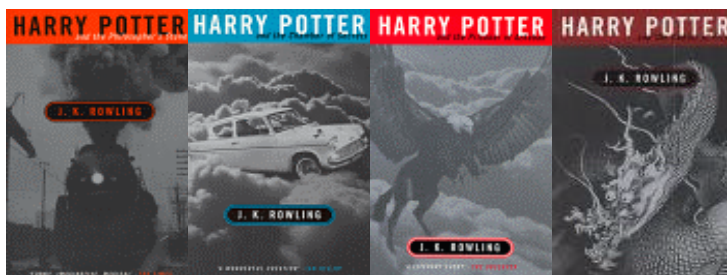
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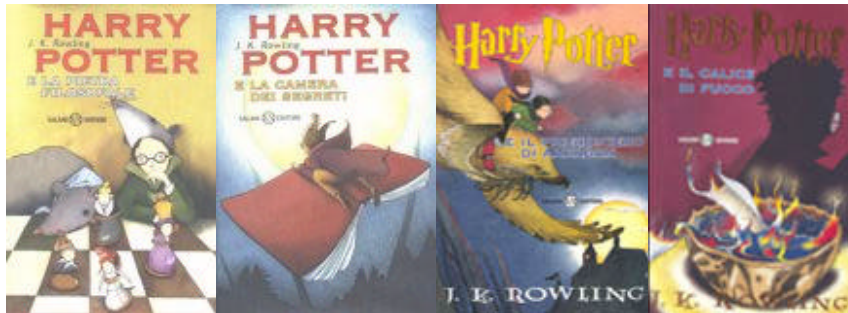
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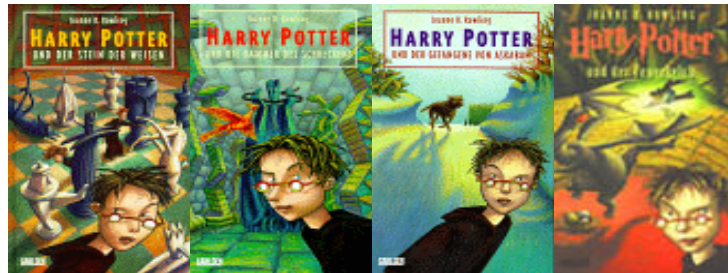
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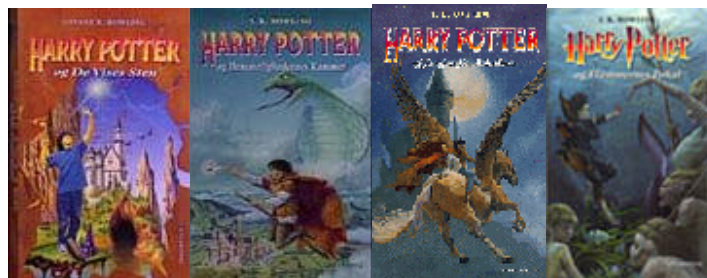
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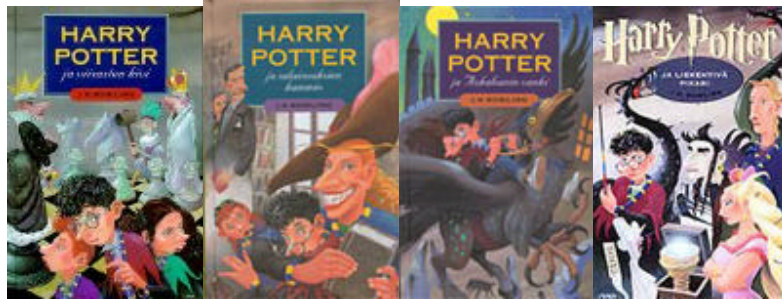
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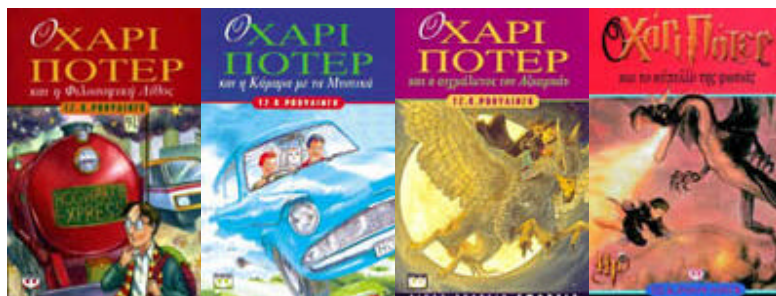
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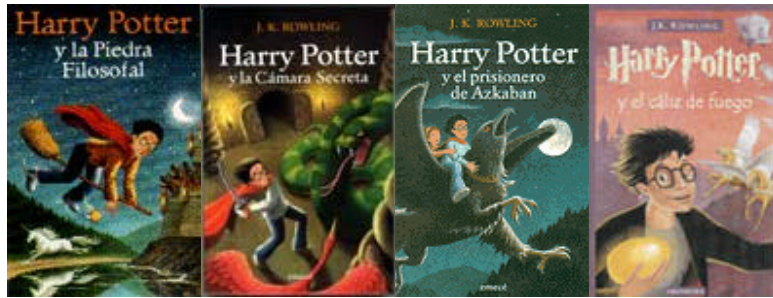
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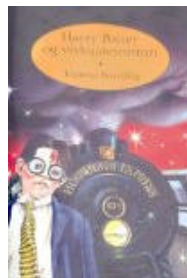
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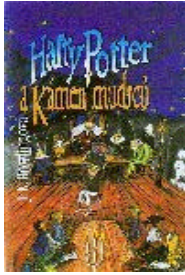
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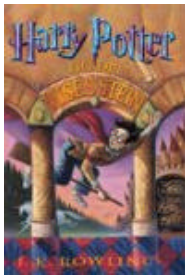
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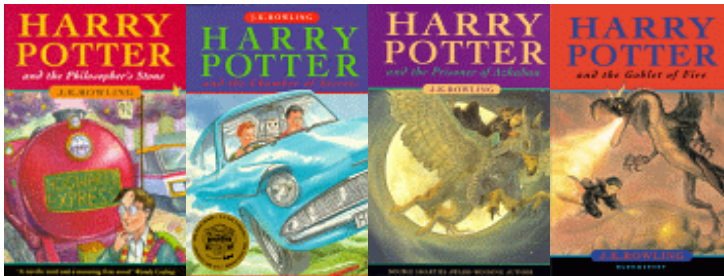
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