J . K . R O W L ! N G

HARRY

POTTER

/

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 11 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.

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“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 / 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.

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“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).

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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.

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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).

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“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 11 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.

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“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. We’ll be shopping for a vacation home in

Majorca this time tomorrow.”

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

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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

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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.”

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“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 hell 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 pokeryV ’ said Harry in a fierce voice. “Hocus

pocus — squiggly wiggly — ”

“MUUUUUUM!” 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.

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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 doorbell rang and Uncle

Vernon’s furious face appeared at the foot of the

stairs.

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“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.

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DOBBY’S WARNING

Harry 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

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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 Petunia’s 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 — ”

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“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 hiccoughing, 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 is a

house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family

forever. ...”

“Do they know you’re here?” asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

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“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

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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.

“Harry 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

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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?

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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-

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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. “Forgot 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 11 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.

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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?

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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.

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3

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 — ”

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“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

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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.

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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.

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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?”

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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 coming 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. “Why?”

“I’ve heard Dad talking about him,” said George. “He

was a big supporter of You-Know-Who.”

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“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?”

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“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.

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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.

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“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-

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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\ Car gone — 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 havedied, you could

have been seen, you could have lost your father his

job

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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 Magid 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

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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 — ”

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“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.

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“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 as 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

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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!”

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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?”

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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 nighti” shouted Mrs. Weasley. “What have you got

to say about that, eh?”

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“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.”

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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.

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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,

scruff yV’ 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.

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“ 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

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Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

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.”

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He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up

again almost immediately, pulling from underneath

him a molting, 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 laid 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?”

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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. ...”

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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 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 — ”

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“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 — ”

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“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.

It felt as though he were 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 quite alone, but where he was, he had no idea.

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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

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.”

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“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.”

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.

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“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.

“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.”

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“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

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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. Ill 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 shab by-looking wizards were watching

him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each

other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his

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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.

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“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.

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“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

anywhere — ”

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.

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“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.

“But you’re Mugglesl” 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 ten-pound 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 minature train tracks

through the bank’s underground tunnels. Harry

enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys’

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vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in

Knock- turn 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.

“Well 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,

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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 harassed-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

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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. “Well

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.

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“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 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 — ”

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“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.”

“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.

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“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 — ”

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

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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 from 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 them how bus stops worked, but

stopped quickly at the look on Mrs. Weasley’s face.

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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.

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5

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. 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

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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 — ”

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“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 perfectly confident;

this wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo

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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.

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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?”

Harry gave a hollow laugh. “The Dursleys haven’t

given me pocket money for about six years.”

Ron pressed his ear to the cold barrier.

“Can’t hear a thing,” he said tensely. “What’re we

going to do? I don’t know how long it’ll take Mum and

Dad to get back to us.”

They looked around. People were still watching them,

mainly because of Hedwig’s continuing screeches.

“I think we’d better go and wait by the car,” said

Harry. “We’re attracting too much atten — ”

“Harry!” said Ron, his eyes gleaming. “The car!”

“What about it?”

“We can fly the car to Hogwarts!”

“But I thought — ”

“We’re stuck, right? And we’ve got to get to school,

haven’t we? And even underage wizards are allowed to

use magic if it’s a real emergency, section nineteen or

something of the Restriction of Thingy — ”

“But your mum and dad ...” said Harry, pushing

against the barrier again in the vain hope that it

would give way. “How will they get home?”

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“They don’t need the car!” said Ron impatiently. “They

know how to Apparate! You know, just vanish and

reappear at home! They only bother with Floo powder

and the car because we’re all underage and we’re not

allowed to Apparate yet. ...”

Harry’s feeling of panic turned suddenly to

excitement.

“Can you fly it?”

“No problem,” said Ron, wheeling his trolley around to

face the exit. “C’mon, let’s go. If we hurry we’ll be able

to follow the Hogwarts Express — ”

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.

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“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

accelerator; 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 — ”

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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 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

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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. ...”

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!”

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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.

“IVoooooo!” 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.

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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

golf-ball-sized 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 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

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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 without a backward look. Then,

dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off

into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

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“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 was among them, easily

visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile,

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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.

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“Maybe he’s ill!” said Ron hopefully.

“Maybe he’s left,” said Harry, “because he missed out

on the Defense Against the 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.

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“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 — ”

“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.

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“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 anymore. 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.

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Harry gaped at her. Now she’d 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 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.

“Well go and get our stuff,” said Ron in a hopeless

sort of voice.

“What are you talking about, Weasley?” barked

Professor McGonagall.

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“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 — ”

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“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.

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.

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“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 — ”

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“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?”

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.

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“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.

“Unbelievablel” beamed Seamus.

“Cool,” said Dean.

“Amazing,” said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn’t help it. He grinned, too.

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6

GILDEROY LOCKHART

The 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 streamed in, circling the hall and

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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.

“Errol\” 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.

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“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.

“— STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN

SURPRISED 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. Weasley’s 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.”

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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.

“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

Hufflepuffs 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

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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 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?”

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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

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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-Who-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 ear-muffs 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.

“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.

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“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.

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,

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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 Venomous 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” (Hermione beamed as she

had her hand shaken too) “ — and Ron Weasley.

Wasn’t that your flying car?”

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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? I’d have died of fear if I’d 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 to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as

it scuttled over the desktop avoiding his wand.

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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

T ransfiguration .

“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?”

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Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing

furiously.

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

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— “maybe your friend could take it and I could stand

next to you? And then, could you sign it?”

“ 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

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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 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 well 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.

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“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 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

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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?

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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 Ogden’s

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?”

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.”

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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, waggling 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 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.

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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 Pesternomti”

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.

“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

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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.

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7

MUDBLOODS AND MURMURS

Harry 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

disasterous 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 than he would have liked by Oliver

Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

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“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 — ”

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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?”

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“Yes,” said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the

complicated rules of Quidditch. “They’re called

Bludgers. There are two Beaters 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 Quaffle — 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.

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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 tousle-haired, next to fourth year

Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nodding off against

the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie 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 different-colored 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.

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“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 — ”

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. Stiff-legged 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.

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“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.

“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!”

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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!”

“Ah,” said Flint. “But Tve got a specially signed note

here from Professor Snape. % Professor S. Snape, give

the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the

Quidditch field owinq 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.

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“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.

“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, openmouthed, at the seven superb

broomsticks in front of him.

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“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

Malfoy’s 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.

“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

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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.

“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

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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 Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his

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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’y man for the job,” said Hagrid,

offering them a plate of treacle toffee, while Ron

coughed squelchily into his basin. “An’ I mean the

on’y one. Gettin’ very difficult ter find anyone fer 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

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know, non-magic parents. There are 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’ 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 toffee

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?”

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Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

“I have not been giving out signed photos,” he said

hotly. “If Lockhart’s still spreading that around — ”

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’ think he did,” said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling.

“An’ then I told him I’d never read one o’ his books an’

he decided ter go. Treacle toffee, 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.

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“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 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’ 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 toffee 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 hiccoughing

occasionally, but only bringing up two very small

slugs.

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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.”

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.”

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“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. ...

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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.

“What are you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you’re

getting a little drowsy? Great Scott — look at the time!

“We’ve been here nearly four hours! I’d 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

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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.”

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d

THE DEATHDAY PARTY

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.

Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn’t been a

happy practice session. Fred and George, who had

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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,

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“that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a

blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless

Hunt?”

“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

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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 — ”

“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

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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 ...”

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!”

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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

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:

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“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.

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“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.

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“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.

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“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!”

“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 smoldering 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

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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.

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

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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.

“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,

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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 3 1 ST OCTOBER, 1 492

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.

“I expect they’ve let it rot to give it a stronger flavor,”

said Hermione knowledgeably, 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.

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“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

glummest 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.”

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.

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“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\ Pimplyl”

“Oh, dear,” said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them

through the crowd.

“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

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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).

“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

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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.

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.

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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!”

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 —

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“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.

“Loo/c!”

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.

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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.

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9

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.

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“Come with me, Argus,” he said to Filch. “You, too,

Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger.”

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

“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 laid

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 Trans-mogrifian Torture — I’ve seen it used many

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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 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?”

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“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.

“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 foreboding 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?”

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Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an

explanation about the deathday party. "... there were

hundreds of ghosts, they’ll 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.

“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.”

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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 punishmenti”

“We will be able to cure her, Argus,” said Dumbledore

patiently. “Professer 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 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?”

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“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.”

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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

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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

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 three-foot-long composition on “The

Medieval Assembly of European Wizards.”

“I don’t believe it, I’m still eight inches short. ...” said

Ron furiously, 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

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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.

“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 staffroom

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

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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 lecture 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 snapping 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?”

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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 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

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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 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.

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“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 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

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will return, if you please, to history, to solid,

believable, verifiable facti”

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 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 reputation 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

Creevey went past.

“Hiya, Harry!”

“Hullo, Colin,” said Harry automatically.

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“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 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.

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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. ...”

“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. ...”

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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;

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the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and

scratched and one of them was dangling off its

hinges.

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!”

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“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.

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 — ”

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Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry

forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

“Get — away — from — there — ” Percy 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 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

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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, MudbloodsV — 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.”

“They could’ve 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.

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“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 impatiently. “But getting hold of the recipe will

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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. ...”

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10

THE ROGUE BLUDGER

Since 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 put my wand to his

throat — I then screwed up my remaining strength

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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 GhoulsV’ said Lockhart, taking the

note from Hermione and smiling widely at her.

“Possibly my very favorite book. You enjoyed it?”

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“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 — ”

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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.

“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

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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 sincerely 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 — thatll 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. ...”

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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. / 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 — ”

“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

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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 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 field, 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

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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.

“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 field. 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. ...

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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 — ”

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

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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.

“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.

“Oliver, this is insane,” said Alicia Spinnet 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!”

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“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 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

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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

aiming 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 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

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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.”

“iVo!” 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 George Weasley, wrestling the rogue

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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.

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Madam Pomfrey wasn’t at all pleased.

“You should have come straight to me!” she raged,

holding up 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.

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“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 retreated, 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,

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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

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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. ...”

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.”

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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 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, sir.

... 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 — ”

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Dobby froze, horrors truck, 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 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 — ”

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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.

“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.

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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.

“But, Albus ... surely ... who?”

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“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.

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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 left-handed. “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.

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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

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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

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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.”

k k k

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;

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he was a pureblood, 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 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.

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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 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.

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“Silence! SILENCE!” Snape roared. “Anyone who has

been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draught —

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 puffed-

up 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.

“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.

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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 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.

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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 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.”

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“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:

“ ExpelliarmusV’ 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 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.

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“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 — ”

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, “Rictusempral”

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he

doubled up, wheezing.

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“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, “Tarantallegral” 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. ... Careful there, Miss Fawcett. ...

Pinch it hard, it’ll stop bleeding in a second, Boot —

“I think I’d 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

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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?”

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But Lockhart wasn’t listening.

“Three — two — one — go!” he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed,

“ Serpensortial”

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 relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful —

but certainly not angry and scared.

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“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 Ron’s 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.

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“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.”

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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.”

•k k k

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 Slytherin? 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

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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 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

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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.

“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?”

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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.

“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.”

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“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 — ”

“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.

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

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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,

snow-flecked 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. “I’d 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. ...”

Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along

another corridor, which was particularly dark; the

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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.

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“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 — ”

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 a loud 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,

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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.

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.

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He knew now where he was being taken. This must be

where Dumbledore lived.

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THE POLY JUICE 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 spindle-legged 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

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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

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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

smoldering 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

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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’ 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

“Hagridl” 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.”

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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.

“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.

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“At this rate, well 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 were about to sprout fangs or spit

poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and

hissing as he passed.

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.

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“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 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

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hour, adding more lace-wings to the potion. It’s

ready.”

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” said Hermione, shirting 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?”

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

toffee, 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.

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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 “Pin-head,” kept

asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry

didn’t even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud,

snide remarks 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 Malfoy’s

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

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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?”

“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,

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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 forehead 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.

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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.

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.

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“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, 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

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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 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.

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“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.

“Well 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. ...”

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They went down the marble staircase. All they needed

now was 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.

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“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?”

“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

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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.

“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 — ”

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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 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.

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“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 purebloods, 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.”

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?”

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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?”

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“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 — ”

“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

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Malfoy hadn’t noticed anything. Harry 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?”

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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 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\”

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\* V

THE VERY SECRET DIARY

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 gone from her face

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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 Hair-Raising Potion when an

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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.

“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

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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?”

“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

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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 cra2y?” 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 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.”

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“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.

“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 fur-free, 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.

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“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.

“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,

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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 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.

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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.”

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,

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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 still, heart-shaped confetti was falling

from the pale blue ceiling. Harry went over to the

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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 looking as though the first person to ask him for

a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

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“Please, Hermione, tell me you weren’t one of the

forty-six,” 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! ’Arry 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 ’Arry Potter in

person,” he said, twanging his harp in a threatening

sort of way.

“Not here,” Harry hissed, trying to escape.

“Stay stilll” 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.

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Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up

before the dwarf started singing, causing something of

a holdup in the corridor.

“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 — ”

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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 obviously 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,

“ ExpelliarmusV’ 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.

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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.

Jc Jc Jc

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.

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“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.

“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’d 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

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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 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.

“OK.”

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 minuscule 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

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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, frail-looking 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.

“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

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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 — ”

“You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I

believe?” said Dippet curiously.

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle, reddening slightly.

“You are Muggle-born?”

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“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.”

Dippet 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 Dippet 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.

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But Harry was sure it was the same sort of “no” that

he himself had given Dumbledore.

Dippet 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,

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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

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.

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“ ’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.”

“What 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’! 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 —

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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,

“NOOOOOOO!”

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.

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.”

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CORNELIUS FUDGE

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.

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“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?”

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“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.

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“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.”

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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, openmouthed, 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.

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“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

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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

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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 canceled,” 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:

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“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 sixth-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 —

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“HermioneY’ 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.

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“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 — ”

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“I think,” said Harry, more quietly still, “it’s time to

get my dad’s old cloak out again.”

Harry had inherited just one thing from his father: a

long and silvery 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

Seamus 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?”

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“What’s that for?” said Harry, pointing at the

crossbow as they stepped inside.

“Nothin’ — nothin’ — “ Hagrid muttered. “I’ve bin

expectin’ — doesn’ 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 panic-stricken 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

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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

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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.

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“ 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 — ”

“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

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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.

“iVo!” 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 only truly have left this school

when none here are loyal to me. You will also find

that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those

who ask for it.”

For a second, Harry was almost sure Dumbledore’s

eyes flickered toward the corner where he and Ron

stood hidden.

“Admirable sentiments,” said Malfoy, bowing. “We

shall all miss your — er — highly individual way of

running things, Albus, and only hope that your

successor will manage to prevent any — ah — killins.”

He strode to the cabin door, opened it, and bowed

Dumbledore out. Fudge, fiddling with his bowler,

waited for Hagrid to go ahead of him, but Hagrid

stood his ground, took a deep breath, and said

carefully, “If anyone wanted ter find out some stuff,

all they’d have ter do would be ter follow the spiders.

That’d lead ’em right! That’s all I’m sayin’.”

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Fudge stared at him in amazement.

“All right, I’m cornin’,” said Hagrid, pulling on his

moleskin overcoat. But as he was about to follow

Fudge through the door, he stopped again and said

loudly, “An’ someone’ll need ter feed Fang while I’m

away.”

The door banged shut and Ron pulled off the

Invisibility Cloak.

“We’re in trouble now,” he said hoarsely. “No

Dumbledore. They might as well close the school

tonight. There’ll be an attack a day with him gone.”

Fang started howling, scratching at the closed door.

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ARAGOG

Summer 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 that

didn’t look worried and tense, and any laughter that

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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 Hog warts 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 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. ...”

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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 safe to

let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the

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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

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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.

“Well 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.

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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.

“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.

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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 nowhere 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,

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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

toffee 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.

“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. “I’d light mine, too, but

you know — it’d probably blow up or something. ...”

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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.

Something wet touched Harry’s hand and he jumped

backward, crushing Ron’s 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.

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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 stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange

rumbling noise and then silence.

“What d’you think it’s doing?” said Harry.

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“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,

openmouthed, 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.

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His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his

wand back into his robes.

“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.

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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 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, pincered head

was milky white. He was blind.

“What is it?” he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

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“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.

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

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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 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. ...”

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“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 pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to

be tired of talking. He was backing slowly into his

domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch

slowly toward Harry and Ron.

“Well 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.”

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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

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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 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, I’d 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.”

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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 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.

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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

snuffling 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 ?”

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THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

All 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?”

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There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville

Longbottom’s wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs

on his desk. Professor 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.

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“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.

“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.

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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

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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 something 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 spotted 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.

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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.”

“I 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

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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.

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“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.

“Try 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.

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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’s 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

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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 — ”

Ron’s 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 if!” 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! Spiders flee 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. ...”

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry’s arm.

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“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 staffroom,” 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 staffroom. 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 staffroom. Immediately,

please.”

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

“Not another attack? Not now?”

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“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 staffroom 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 staffroom. “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.

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“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?”

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Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

“I — I really never — you may have misunderstood — ”

“Well leave it to you, then, Gilderoy,” said Professor

McGonagall. “Tonight will be an excellent time to do

it. Well 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.

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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 staffroom. “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 pureblood. 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 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

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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, midnight-blue, 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.

“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

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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 hairy chin.

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 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

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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 d’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.”

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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

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Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she’d ever

laughed at my glasses.”

“Where exactly did you see the eyes?” said Harry.

“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 speak Parseltongue 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.

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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.

“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.

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“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 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.

“Lumosl” 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.

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“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.

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.

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“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, “Obliviatel”

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

rock-fall. “I’m okay — this git’s not, though — he got

blasted by the wand — ”

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. ...”

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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.

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no

need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their

eyes looked strangely alive.

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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.

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THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN

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.

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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.

“Ginnyl” Harry muttered, sprinting to her and

dropping to his knees. “Ginny — 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.”

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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.

“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 — ”

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.

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“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.

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. ...

“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

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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 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 ...”

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“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, “7 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 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. ...”

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“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 admit, even / 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

Dippet 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. ...”

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“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 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

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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

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“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.

“Dumbledore ’s been driven out of this castle by the

mere memory of me!” he hissed.

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“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 — ”

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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

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alive. That’s where all your power got you. You’re in

hiding. You’re ugly, you’re foul — ”

Riddle’s face contorted. Then he forced it into an

awful smile.

“So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that’s a

powerful counter-charm. 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.

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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.

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.

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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 sudden shower of dark blood spattered 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.

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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.

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

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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. ...” 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. Fawkes’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

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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

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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 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 — ”

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“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

rockfall.

“Ginny\” Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the

rock to pull 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.

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“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.

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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.

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“There’s no need to sound so disappointed,” he said

grimly, wiping flecks of blood and slime off his

glasses.

“Oh, well ... I’d 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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DOBBY’S REWARD

For 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. Weasley’s tight

embrace.

“You saved her! You saved her! How did you do it?”

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“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 ruby-encrusted 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.

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“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.”

Relief — warm, sweeping, glorious relief — swept over

Harry.

“W-what’s that?” said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice.

“You-Know-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?”

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“His d-diary!” Ginny sobbed. “I’ve b-been writing in it,

and he’s been w- writing back all year — ”

“Ginnyl” 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 — ”

“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?”

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“Right,” said Professor McGonagall crisply, also

moving to the door. “Ill 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.

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.

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“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. “I’d 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.

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“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 / 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 descendant 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.”

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“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.

“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

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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. “Well 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. Malfoy ’s 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 Weasley’s 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

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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 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.

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“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 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

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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.

“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.”

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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 — ”

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“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, I’d 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 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.”

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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?”

“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

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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.

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