

6. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

With Voldemort's return now public knowledge, fear grips the wizarding world. Death Eaters carry out brazen attacks, destroying London's Millennium Bridge and kidnapping the wand-maker, Ollivander. At his home, Severus Snape makes an Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother. He swears to protect Draco and to carry out a task assigned to him by the Dark Lord, should Draco fail.

Dumbledore retrieves Harry from the Dursleys and takes him to persuade a former Potions Master, Horace Slughorn, to return to teach at Hogwarts. Slughorn is a collector of talented students and is eventually charmed into accepting the post. Dumbledore informs Harry that he will be giving him private lessons throughout the year. At Hogwarts, Snape is surprisingly announced as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, while Slughorn takes over Potions.

In his first Potions class, Harry, not having bought the required textbook, borrows a used one from the classroom cupboard. The book is inscribed "This book is the property of the Half-Blood Prince." The previous owner has filled the margins with brilliant, improved instructions and helpful spells of his own invention. Using the Prince's notes, Harry excels in Potions for the first time, winning a bottle of Felix Felicis, a "liquid luck" potion, from Slughorn.

Meanwhile, Harry's private lessons with Dumbledore consist of viewing memories of Voldemort's past in the Pensieve. Dumbledore believes that understanding Voldemort's history is the key to defeating him. They explore his childhood as the lonely orphan Tom Riddle and his time at Hogwarts. The most crucial memory, however, is from Professor Slughorn, who taught a young Tom Riddle. The memory Dumbledore possesses has been tampered with; Slughorn is clearly hiding something he is ashamed of. Dumbledore tasks Harry with retrieving the true, unaltered memory from Slughorn.

Throughout the school year, Harry becomes obsessed with the belief that Draco Malfoy has become a Death Eater and is plotting something sinister inside the castle. He and Ron use the Marauder's Map to track Draco, who is often seen disappearing into the Room of Requirement. His suspicions are dismissed by Ron and Hermione as paranoia. During one confrontation, Harry uses a dark spell he learned from the Half-Blood Prince's book, *Sectumsempra*, which grievously injures Malfoy. Horrified by the spell's violent effect, Harry gets rid of the book.

Romantic subplots flourish. Ron begins a very public and demonstrative relationship with Lavender Brown, making Hermione deeply jealous. Harry, in turn, realizes he has developed strong feelings for Ginny Weasley, who is dating another student. After a Gryffindor Quidditch Cup victory, Harry spontaneously kisses Ginny, and they begin a relationship.

After several failed attempts to get the memory, Harry uses his vial of Felix Felicis. The liquid luck leads him on a strange but successful journey where he convinces a slightly inebriated Slughorn to finally relinquish the true memory. The memory reveals a young Tom Riddle asking Slughorn about a piece of extremely dark magic: Horcruxes. A Horcrux is an object in which a wizard has hidden a piece of their soul, granting them immortality as long as the object remains intact. Riddle reveals his ambition to split his soul not once, but seven times. Dumbledore explains that

this is the secret to Voldemort's survival. He reveals that two Horcruxes have already been destroyed: Tom Riddle's diary and Marvolo Gaunt's ring (which Dumbledore destroyed over the summer, sustaining a cursed, blackened hand in the process). They must find and destroy the remaining four to make Voldemort mortal again.

Dumbledore reveals he has located another potential Horcrux and asks Harry to accompany him to retrieve it. They travel to a seaside cave, where they must pass through magical defenses, including a door that can only be opened with a blood sacrifice. Inside, they find a basin filled with a mysterious potion, with the Horcrux—a locket—at the bottom. Dumbledore, reasoning that the potion cannot be touched or vanished, forces himself to drink it all. The potion causes him immense pain and psychological torment, weakening him severely. Harry retrieves the locket and helps the frail Dumbledore apparate back to Hogsmeade.

Upon their return, they see the Dark Mark hovering over the Hogwarts Astronomy Tower. They fly to the tower, where they are ambushed by Draco Malfoy. Draco disarms a weakened Dumbledore, revealing that he was the one tasked by Voldemort to kill the Headmaster. He had been using the Room of Requirement to repair a Vanishing Cabinet that would allow Death Eaters to secretly enter the castle. Draco hesitates, clearly terrified and unable to commit murder. Several other Death Eaters, including Bellatrix Lestrange, arrive through the cabinet. Just then, Snape appears. In a shocking turn, Snape fulfills his Unbreakable Vow and kills Dumbledore with the Avada Kedavra curse.

The blast throws Dumbledore's body from the tower. A battle erupts in the castle as the Death Eaters escape. An enraged Harry pursues Snape, who effortlessly repels all of Harry's attacks. As he flees, Snape reveals to Harry that he is the Half-Blood Prince before disappearing. Back in Dumbledore's office, Harry discovers that the locket they retrieved from the cave is a fake. Inside is a note from someone with the initials "R.A.B.," who states they have stolen the real Horcrux with the intent of destroying it. Dumbledore's perilous journey was for nothing. The school mourns the loss of its great Headmaster. Following the funeral, Harry makes a momentous decision: he will not return to Hogwarts for his final year. Instead, he will dedicate himself to finding and destroying Voldemort's remaining Horcruxes. Ron and Hermione pledge to go with him.