Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard; it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good -- every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell. Marcus Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

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"Come on, Hermione," Ron muttered desperately. Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well- chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape's robes. 153 It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row-- Snape would never know what had happened.

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It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom. "Neville, you can look!" Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid's jacket for the last five minutes. Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick -- he hit the field on all fours -- coughed -- and something gold fell into his hand. "I've got the Snitch!" he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots. The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the House Championship.

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Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn't know which was worse — people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him holding a mattress.It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermione as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do.

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She had also lent him Quidditch Through the Ages, which turned out to be a very interesting read. Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one. In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection.

"It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron.

"Or both," said Harry.

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But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

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Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus. All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later. As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls.

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had. His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

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On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom. Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye). Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger.

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It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived. "Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the invisibility cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk. Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light, while a high voice cackled with laughter.

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"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," said Ron, when Harry told him about these dreams.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that he hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was. They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks.

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Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again. Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Sorcerer's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

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"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

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"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them... it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the field," said Hermione. As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee? Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to keep running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own.

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Potions lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry. Could Snape possibly know they'd found out about the Sorcerer's Stone? Harry didn't see how he could -- yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

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Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's Locomotor Mortis," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter. Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and colorcoding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

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"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it A."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me...." Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione.

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They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

　　"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months.

There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn't know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey -- would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert's fangs were poisonous. Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed. "It's not just my hand," he whispered, "although that feels like it's about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me.

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He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me -- I've told her it was a dog, but I don't think she believes me -I shouldn't have hit him at the Quidditch match, that's why he's doing this."

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

"It'll all be over at midnight on Saturday," said Hermione, but this didn't soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke into a sweat.

"Midnight on Saturday!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Oh no oh no -- I've just remembered -- Charlie's letter was in that book Malfoy took, he's going to know we're getting rid of Norbert."

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Harry and Hermione didn't get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep. "It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that." They found Fang, the boarhound, sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.