

'Anything new?' said Harry.

'Not really ...' Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. 'Oh, look, your dad's in here, Ron - he's all right!' she added quickly, for Ron had looked round in alarm. 'It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. *"This second search of the Death Eater's residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off."*'

'Yeah, mine!' said Harry. 'I told him at King's Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him -'

'But how can he have done, Harry?' said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. 'We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?'

'Were you?' said Harry, taken aback. 'I wasn't!'

'Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late ... well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the Entrance Hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!'

Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

'Someone's sent it to him by owl, then,' he said. 'His mother or someone.'

'All the owls are being checked, too,' said Hermione. 'Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach.'

Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say.

There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

'Can you think of any way Malfoy -?'

'Oh, drop it, Harry,' said Ron.

'Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!' said Harry, firing up.

'Well, as I'm not invited to any parties,' said Ron, getting to his feet again, 'I think I'll go to bed.'

He stomped off towards the door to the boys' dormitories, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after him.

'Harry?' said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. 'I've got a message for you.'

'From Professor Slughorn?' asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

'No ... from Professor Snape,' said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. 'He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention - er - no matter how many party invitations you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten Flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions, and - and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves.'

'Right,' said Harry grimly. 'Thanks a lot, Demelza.'

— CHAPTER TWELVE —

# Silver and Opals

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing? Harry caught sight of the Headmaster only twice over the next few weeks. He rarely appeared at meals any more, and Harry was sure Hermione was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was supposed to be giving Harry? Dumbledore had said that the lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly abandoned.

Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would still be allowed, given the increasingly tight security measures around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle grounds for a few hours.

Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by reading his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. He did not usually lie in bed reading his textbooks; that sort of behaviour, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who was simply weird that way. Harry felt, however, that the Half-Blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book,

the more he realised how much was in there, not only the handy hints and short cuts on potions that were earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative little jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow alarmingly fast (he had tried this on Crabbe in the corridor, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch); and, perhaps most useful of all, *Muffliato*, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that lengthy conversations could be held in class without being overheard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression throughout and refused to talk at all if Harry had used the *Muffliato* spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell that seemed to have caused the Prince some trouble. There were many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

*Levicorpus (n-vbl)*

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters in brackets. N-vbl ... that had to mean non-verbal. Harry rather doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with non-verbal spells, something Snape had been quick to comment on in every DADA class. On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said *Levicorpus!* inside his head.

'Aaaaaaaargh!'

There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry sent *Advanced Potion-Making* flying in panic; Ron was dangling upside-down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

'Sorry!' yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having fallen out of bed. 'Hang on – I'll let you down –'

He groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic, trying to find the right page; at last he located it and deciphered one cramped word underneath the spell: praying that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought *Liberacorpus!* with all his might.

There was another flash of light and Ron fell in a heap on to his mattress.

'Sorry,' repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

'Tomorrow,' said Ron in a muffled voice, 'I'd rather you set the alarm clock.'

By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs Weasley's hand-knitted sweaters and carrying cloaks, scarves and gloves, Ron's shock had subsided and he had decided that Harry's new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with the story as they sat down for breakfast.

'... and then there was another flash of light and I landed on the bed again!' grinned Ron, helping himself to sausages.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Harry.