



THE DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES

Harry wound his hand tightly into the mane of the nearest thestral, placed a foot on a stump nearby, and scrambled clumsily onto the horse's silken back. It did not object, but twisted its head around, fangs bared, and attempted to continue its eager licking of his robes.

He found there was a way of lodging his knees behind the wing joints that made him feel more secure and looked around at the others. Neville had heaved himself over the back of the next thestral and was now attempting to swing one short leg over the creature's back. Luna was already in place, sitting sidesaddle and adjusting her robes as though she did this every day. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, however, were still standing motionless on the spot, openmouthed and staring.

"What?" he said.

"How're we supposed to get on?" said Ron faintly. "When we can't see the things?"

"Oh it's easy," said Luna, sliding obligingly from her thestral and marching over to him, Hermione, and Ginny. "Come here. . . ."

She pulled them over to the other thestrals standing around and one by one managed to help them onto the backs of their mounts. All three looked extremely nervous as she wound their hands into the horses' manes and told them to grip tightly before getting back onto her own steed.

"This is mad," Ron said faintly, moving his free hand gingerly up and down his horse's neck. "Mad . . . if I could just see it —"

"You'd better hope it stays invisible," said Harry darkly. "We all ready, then?"

They all nodded and he saw five pairs of knees tighten beneath their robes.

"Okay . . ."

He looked down at the back of his thestral's glossy black head and swallowed. "Ministry of Magic, visitors' entrance, London, then," he said uncertainly. "Er . . . if you know . . . where to go . . ."

For a moment his thestral did nothing at all. Then, with a sweeping movement that nearly unseated him, the wings on either side extended, the horse crouched slowly and then rocketed upward so fast and so steeply that Harry had to clench his arms and legs tightly around the horse to avoid sliding backward over its bony rump. He closed his eyes and put his face down into the horse's silky mane as they burst through the topmost branches of the trees and soared out into a bloodred sunset.

Harry did not think he had ever moved so fast: The thestral streaked over the castle, its wide wings hardly beating. The cooling air was slapping Harry's face; eyes screwed up against the rushing wind, he looked around and saw his five fellows soaring along behind him, each of them bent as low as possible into the neck of their thestral to protect themselves from its slipstream.

They were over the Hogwarts grounds, they had passed Hogsmeade. Harry could see mountains and gullies below them. In the

falling darkness Harry saw small collections of lights as they passed over more villages, then a winding road on which a single car was beetling its way home through the hills. . . .

"This is bizarre!" Harry heard Ron yell from somewhere behind him, and he imagined how it must feel to be speeding along at this height with no visible means of support. . . .

Twilight fell: The sky turned to a light, dusky purple littered with tiny silver stars, and soon it was only the lights of Muggle towns that gave them any clue of how far from the ground they were or how very fast they were traveling. Harry's arms were wrapped tightly around his horse's neck as he willed it to go even faster. How much time had elapsed since he had seen Sirius lying on the Department of Mysteries floor? How much longer would he be able to resist Voldemort? All Harry knew for sure was that Sirius had neither done as Voldemort wanted, nor died, for he was convinced that either outcome would cause him to feel Voldemort's jubilation or fury course through his own body, making his scar sear as painfully as it had on the night Mr. Weasley was attacked. . . .

On they flew through the gathering darkness; Harry's face felt stiff and cold, his legs numb from gripping the thestral's sides so tightly, but he did not dare shift positions lest he slip. . . . He was deaf from the thundering in his ears and his mouth was dry and frozen from the rush of cold night air. He had lost all sense of how far they had come; all his faith was in the beast below him, still streaking purposefully through the night, barely flapping its wings as it sped ever onward. . . .

If they were too late . . .

He's still alive, he's still fighting, I can feel it. . . .

If Voldemort decided Sirius was not going to crack . . .

I'd know. . . .

Harry's stomach gave a jolt. The thestral's head was suddenly pointing toward the ground and he had actually slid forward a few inches along its neck. They were descending at last. . . . He heard one of the

girls shriek behind him and twisted around dangerously but could see no sign of a falling body. . . . Presumably they had received a shock from the change of position, just as he had. . . .

And now bright orange lights were growing larger and rounder on all sides. They could see the tops of buildings, streams of headlights like luminous insect eyes, squares of pale yellow that were windows. Quite suddenly, it seemed, they were hurtling toward the pavement. Harry gripped the thestral with every last ounce of his strength, braced for a sudden impact, but the horse touched the dark ground as lightly as a shadow and Harry slid from his back, looking around at the street where the overflowing dumpster still stood a short way from the vandalized telephone box, both drained of color in the flat orange glare of the streetlights.

Ron landed a short way away and toppled immediately off his thestral onto the pavement.

"Never again," he said, struggling to his feet. He made as though to stride away from his thestral, but, unable to see it, collided with its hindquarters and almost fell over again. "Never, ever again . . . that was the worst —"

Hermione and Ginny touched down on either side of him. Both slid off their mounts a little more gracefully than Ron, though with similar expressions of relief at being back on firm ground. Neville jumped down, shaking, but Luna dismounted smoothly.

"Where do we go from here, then?" she asked Harry in a politely interested voice, as though this was all a rather interesting day-trip.

"Over here," he said. He gave his thestral a quick, grateful pat, then led the way quickly to the battered telephone box and opened the door. "Come *on!*" he urged the others as they hesitated.

Ron and Ginny marched in obediently; Hermione, Neville, and Luna squashed themselves in after them; Harry took one glance back at the thestrals, now foraging for scraps of rotten food inside the dumpster, then forced himself into the box after Luna.

"Whoever's nearest the receiver, dial six two four four two!" he said.

Ron did it, his arm bent bizarrely to reach the dial. As it whirred back into place the cool female voice sounded inside the box, "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger," Harry said very quickly, "Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood . . . We're here to save someone, unless your Ministry can do it first!"

"Thank you," said the cool female voice. "Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes."

Half a dozen badges slid out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. Hermione scooped them up and handed them mutely to Harry over Ginny's head; he glanced at the topmost one.

HARRY POTTER

RESCUE MISSION

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

"Fine!" Harry said loudly, as his scar gave another throb. "Now can we *move*?"

The floor of the telephone box shuddered and the pavement rose up past the glass windows of the telephone box. The scavenging thestrals were sliding out of sight, blackness closed over their heads, and with a dull grinding noise they sank down into the depths of the Ministry of Magic.

A chink of soft golden light hit their feet and, widening, rose up their bodies. Harry bent his knees and held his wand as ready as he could in such cramped conditions, peering through the glass to see whether anybody was waiting for them in the Atrium, but it seemed to be completely empty. The light was dimmer than it had been by day. There were no fires burning under the mantelpieces set into the

walls, but he saw as the lift slid smoothly to a halt that golden symbols continued to twist sinuously in the dark blue ceiling.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant evening," said the woman's voice.

The door of the telephone box burst open; Harry toppled out of it, followed by Neville and Luna. The only sound in the Atrium was the steady rush of water from the golden fountain, where jets from the wands of the witch and wizard, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip of the goblin's hat, and the house-elf's ears continued to gush into the surrounding pool.

"Come on," said Harry quietly and the six of them sprinted off down the hall, Harry in the lead, past the fountain, toward the desk where the security man who had weighed Harry's wand had sat and which was now deserted.

Harry felt sure that there ought to be a security person there, sure that their absence was an ominous sign, and his feeling of foreboding increased as they passed through the golden gates to the lifts. He pressed the nearest down button and a lift clattered into sight almost immediately, the golden grilles slid apart with a great, echoing clanking, and they dashed inside. Harry stabbed the number nine button, the grilles closed with a bang, and the lift began to descend, jangling and rattling. Harry had not realized how noisy the lifts were on the day that he had come with Mr. Weasley — he was sure that the din would raise every security person within the building, yet when the lift halted, the cool female voice said, "Department of Mysteries," and the grilles slid open again, they stepped out into the corridor where nothing was moving but the nearest torches, flickering in the rush of air from the lift.

Harry turned toward the plain black door. After months and months of dreaming about it, he was here at last. . . .

"Let's go," he whispered, and he led the way down the corridor, Luna right behind him, gazing around with her mouth slightly open.

“Okay, listen,” said Harry, stopping again within six feet of the door. “Maybe . . . maybe a couple of people should stay here as a — as a lookout, and —”

“And how’re we going to let you know something’s coming?” asked Ginny, her eyebrows raised. “You could be miles away.”

“We’re coming with you, Harry,” said Neville.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Ron firmly.

Harry still did not want to take them all with him, but it seemed he had no choice. He turned to face the door and walked forward. Just as it had in his dream, it swung open and he marched forward, leading the others over the threshold.

They were standing in a large, circular room. Everything in here was black including the floor and ceiling — identical, unmarked, handle-less black doors were set at intervals all around the black walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames burned blue, their cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor so that it looked as though there was dark water underfoot.

“Someone shut the door,” Harry muttered.

He regretted giving this order the moment Neville had obeyed it. Without the long chink of light from the torch-lit corridor behind them, the place became so dark that for a moment the only things they could see were the bunches of shivering blue flames on the walls and their ghostly reflections in the floor below.

In his dream, Harry had always walked purposefully across this room to the door immediately opposite the entrance and walked on. But there were around a dozen doors here. Just as he was gazing ahead at the doors opposite him, trying to decide which was the right one, there was a great rumbling noise and the candles began to move sideways. The circular wall was rotating.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm as though frightened the floor might move too, but it did not. For a few seconds the blue flames around them were blurred to resemble neon lines as the wall sped

around and then, quite as suddenly as it had started, the rumbling stopped and everything became stationary once again.

Harry's eyes had blue streaks burned into them; it was all he could see.

"What was that about?" whispered Ron fearfully.

"I think it was to stop us knowing which door we came in from," said Ginny in a hushed voice.

Harry realized at once that she was right: He could no sooner have picked the exit from the other doors than located an ant upon the jet-black floor. Meanwhile, the door through which they needed to proceed could be any of the dozen surrounding them.

"How're we going to get back out?" said Neville uncomfortably.

"Well, that doesn't matter now," said Harry forcefully, blinking to try and erase the blue lines from his vision, and clutching his wand tighter than ever. "We won't need to get out till we've found Sirius —"

"Don't go calling for him, though!" Hermione said urgently, but Harry had never needed her advice less; his instinct was to keep as quiet as possible for the time being.

"Where do we go, then, Harry?" Ron asked.

"I don't —" Harry began. He swallowed. "In the dreams I went through the door at the end of the corridor from the lifts into a dark room — that's this one — and then I went through another door into a room that kind of . . . glitters. We should try a few doors," he said hastily. "I'll know the right way when I see it. C'mon."

He marched straight at the door now facing him, the others following close behind him, set his left hand against its cool, shining surface, raised his wand, ready to strike the moment it opened, and pushed. It swung open easily.

After the darkness of the first room, the lamps hanging low on golden chains from this ceiling gave the impression that this long rectangular room was much brighter, though there were no glittering, shimmering lights such as Harry had seen in his dreams. The place

was quite empty except for a few desks and, in the very middle of the room, an enormous glass tank of deep-green water, big enough for all of them to swim in, which contained a number of pearly white objects that were drifting around lazily in the liquid.

"What're those things?" whispered Ron.

"Dunno," said Harry.

"Are they fish?" breathed Ginny.

"Aquavirius maggots!" said Luna excitedly. "Dad said the Ministry were breeding —"

"No," said Hermione. She sounded odd. She moved forward to look through the side of the tank. "They're brains."

"Brains?"

"Yes . . . I wonder what they're doing with them?"

Harry joined her at the tank. Sure enough, there could be no mistake now that he saw them at close quarters. Glimmering eerily they drifted in and out of sight in the depths of the green water, looking something like slimy cauliflowers.

"Let's get out of here," said Harry. "This isn't right, we need to try another door —"

"There are doors here too," said Ron, pointing around the walls. Harry's heart sank; how big was this place?

"In my dream I went through that dark room into the second one," he said. "I think we should go back and try from there."

So they hurried back into the dark, circular room; the ghostly shapes of the brains were now swimming before Harry's eyes instead of the blue candle flames.

"Wait!" said Hermione sharply, as Luna made to close the door of the brain room behind them. *"Flagrate!"*

She drew with her wand in midair and a fiery X appeared on the door. No sooner had the door clicked shut behind them than there was a great rumbling, and once again the wall began to revolve very fast, but now there was a great red-gold blur in amongst the faint blue,

and when all became still again, the fiery cross still burned, showing the door they had already tried.

“Good thinking,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s try this one —”

Again he strode directly at the door facing him and pushed it open, his wand still raised, the others at his heels.

This room was larger than the last, dimly lit and rectangular, and the center of it was sunken, forming a great stone pit some twenty feet below them. They were standing on the topmost tier of what seemed to be stone benches running all around the room and descending in steep steps like an amphitheater, or the courtroom in which Harry had been tried by the Wizengamot. Instead of a chained chair, however, there was a raised stone dais in the center of the lowered floor, and upon this dais stood a stone archway that looked so ancient, cracked, and crumbling that Harry was amazed the thing was still standing. Unsupported by any surrounding wall, the archway was hung with a tattered black curtain or veil which, despite the complete stillness of the cold surrounding air, was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched.

“Who’s there?” said Harry, jumping down onto the bench below. There was no answering voice, but the veil continued to flutter and sway.

“Careful!” whispered Hermione.

Harry scrambled down the benches one by one until he reached the stone bottom of the sunken pit. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked slowly toward the dais. The pointed archway looked much taller from where he stood now than when he had been looking down on it from above. Still the veil swayed gently, as though somebody had just passed through it.

“Sirius?” Harry spoke again, but much more quietly now that he was nearer.

He had the strangest feeling that there was someone standing right behind the veil on the other side of the archway. Gripping his wand very tightly, he edged around the dais, but there was nobody there. All that could be seen was the other side of the tattered black veil.

"Let's go," called Hermione from halfway up the stone steps. "This isn't right, Harry, come on, let's go. . . ."

She sounded scared, much more scared than she had in the room where the brains swam, yet Harry thought the archway had a kind of beauty about it, old though it was. The gently rippling veil intrigued him; he felt a very strong inclination to climb up on the dais and walk through it.

"Harry, let's go, okay?" said Hermione more forcefully.

"Okay," he said, but he did not move. He had just heard something. There were faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil.

"What are you saying?" he said very loudly, so that the words echoed all around the surrounding stone benches.

"Nobody's talking, Harry!" said Hermione, now moving over to him.

"Someone's whispering behind there," he said, moving out of her reach and continuing to frown at the veil. "Is that you, Ron?"

"I'm here, mate," said Ron, appearing around the side of the archway.

"Can't anyone else hear it?" Harry demanded, for the whispering and murmuring was becoming louder; without really meaning to put it there, he found his foot was on the dais.

"I can hear them too," breathed Luna, joining them around the side of the archway and gazing at the swaying veil. "There are people *in there*!"

"What do you mean, '*in there*'?" demanded Hermione, jumping down from the bottom step and sounding much angrier than the occasion warranted. "There isn't any '*in there*,' it's just an archway, there's no room for anybody to be there — Harry, stop it, come away —"

She grabbed his arm and pulled, but he resisted.

"Harry, we are supposed to be here for Sirius!" she said in a high-pitched, strained voice.

"Sirius," Harry repeated, still gazing, mesmerized, at the continuously swaying veil. "Yeah . . ."

And then something slid back into place in his brain: Sirius, captured, bound, and tortured, and he was staring at this archway. . . .

He took several paces back from the dais and wrenched his eyes from the veil.

"Let's go," he said.

"That's what I've been trying to — well, come on, then!" said Hermione, and she led the way back around the dais. On the other side, Ginny and Neville were staring, apparently entranced, at the veil too. Without speaking, Hermione took hold of Ginny's arm, Ron Neville's, and they marched them firmly back to the lowest stone bench and clambered all the way back up to the door.

"What d'you reckon that arch was?" Harry asked Hermione as they regained the dark circular room.

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it was dangerous," she said firmly, again inscribing a fiery cross upon the door.

Once more the wall spun and became still again. Harry approached a door at random and pushed. It did not move.

"What's wrong?" said Hermione.

"It's . . . locked . . ." said Harry, throwing his weight at the door, but it did not budge.

"This is it, then, isn't it?" said Ron excitedly, joining Harry in the attempt to force the door open. "Bound to be!"

"Get out of the way!" said Hermione sharply. She pointed her wand at the place where a lock would have been on an ordinary door and said, "*Alohomora!*"

Nothing happened.

"Sirius's knife!" said Harry, and he pulled it out from inside his robes and slid it into the crack between the door and the wall. The others all watched eagerly as he ran it from top to bottom, withdrew it, and then flung his shoulder again at the door. It remained as firmly

shut as ever. What was more, when Harry looked down at the knife, he saw that the blade had melted.

“Right, we’re leaving that room,” said Hermione decisively.

“But what if that’s the one?” said Ron, staring at it with a mixture of apprehension and longing.

“It can’t be, Harry could get through all the doors in his dream,” said Hermione, marking the door with another fiery cross as Harry replaced the now-useless handle of Sirius’s knife in his pocket.

“You know what could be in there?” said Luna eagerly, as the wall started to spin yet again.

“Something blibbering, no doubt,” said Hermione under her breath, and Neville gave a nervous little laugh.

The wall slid back to a halt and Harry, with a feeling of increasing desperation, pushed the next door open.

“This is it!”

He knew it at once by the beautiful, dancing, diamond-sparkling light. As Harry’s eyes became more accustomed to the brilliant glare he saw clocks gleaming from every surface, large and small, grandfather and carriage, hanging in spaces between the bookcases or standing on desks ranging the length of the room, so that a busy, relentless ticking filled the place like thousands of minuscule, marching footsteps. The source of the dancing, diamond-bright light was a towering crystal bell jar that stood at the far end of the room.

“This way!”

Harry’s heart was pumping frantically now that he knew they were on the right track. He led the way forward down the narrow space between the lines of the desks, heading, as he had done in his dream, for the source of the light, the crystal bell jar quite as tall as he was that stood on a desk and appeared to be full of a billowing, glittering wind.

“Oh *look!*” said Ginny, as they drew nearer, pointing at the very heart of the bell jar.

Drifting along in the sparkling current inside was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. As it rose in the jar it cracked open and a hummingbird emerged, which was carried to the very top of the jar, but as it fell on the draft, its feathers became bedraggled and damp again, and by the time it had been borne back to the bottom of the jar it had been enclosed once more in its egg.

“Keep going!” said Harry sharply, because Ginny showed signs of wanting to stop and watch the egg’s progress back into a bird.

“You dawdled enough by that old arch!” she said crossly, but followed him past the bell jar to the only door behind it.

“This is it,” Harry said again, and his heart was now pumping so hard and fast he felt it must interfere with his speech. “It’s through here —”

He glanced around at them all. They had their wands out and looked suddenly serious and anxious. He looked back at the door and pushed. It swung open.

They were there, they had found the place: high as a church and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully in the light issuing from more candle brackets set at intervals along the shelves. Like those in the circular room behind them, their flames were burning blue. The room was very cold.

Harry edged forward and peered down one of the shadowy aisles between two rows of shelves. He could not hear anything nor see the slightest sign of movement.

“You said it was row ninety-seven,” whispered Hermione.

“Yeah,” breathed Harry, looking up at the end of the closest row. Beneath the branch of blue-glowing candles protruding from it glimmered the silver figure 53.

“We need to go right, I think,” whispered Hermione, squinting to the next row. “Yes . . . that’s fifty-four. . . .”

“Keep your wands out,” Harry said softly.

They crept forward, staring behind them as they went on down the

long alleys of shelves, the farther ends of which were in near total darkness. Tiny, yellowing labels had been stuck beneath each glass orb on the shelf. Some of them had a weird, liquid glow; others were as dull and dark within as blown lightbulbs.

They passed row eighty-four . . . eighty-five . . . Harry was listening hard for the slightest sound of movement, but Sirius might be gagged now, or else unconscious . . . *or*, said an unbidden voice inside his head, *he might already be dead*. . .

I'd have felt it, he told himself, his heart now hammering against his Adam's apple. *I'd already know*. . .

"Ninety-seven!" whispered Hermione.

They stood grouped around the end of the row, gazing down the alley beside it. There was nobody there.

"He's right down at the end," said Harry, whose mouth had become slightly dry. "You can't see properly from here. . . ."

And he led them forward, between the towering rows of glass balls, some of which glowed softly as they passed. . . .

"He should be near here," whispered Harry, convinced that every step was going to bring the ragged form of Sirius into view upon the darkened floor. "Anywhere here . . . really close . . ."

"Harry?" said Hermione tentatively, but he did not want to respond. His mouth was very dry now.

"Somewhere about . . . here . . ." he said.

They had reached the end of the row and emerged into more dim candlelight. There was nobody there at all. All was echoing, dusty silence.

"He might be . . ." Harry whispered hoarsely, peering down the alley next door. "Or maybe . . ." He hurried to look down the one beyond that.

"Harry?" said Hermione again.

"What?" he snarled.

"I . . . I don't think Sirius is here."

Nobody spoke. Harry did not want to look at any of them. He felt sick. He did not understand why Sirius was not here. He had to be here. This was where he, Harry, had seen him. . . .

He ran up the space at the end of the rows, staring down them. Empty aisle after empty aisle flickered past. He ran the other way, back past his staring companions. There was no sign of Sirius anywhere, nor any hint of a struggle.

"Harry?" Ron called.

"What?"

He did not want to hear what Ron had to say, did not want to hear Ron tell him he had been stupid, or suggest that they ought to go back to Hogwarts. But the heat was rising in his face and he felt as though he would like to skulk down here in the darkness for a long while before facing the brightness of the Atrium above and the others' accusing stares. . . .

"Have you seen this?" said Ron.

"What?" said Harry, but eagerly this time — it had to be a sign that Sirius had been there, a clue — he strode back to where they were all standing, a little way down row ninety-seven, but found nothing except Ron staring at one of the dusty glass spheres on the shelves.

"What?" Harry repeated glumly.

"It's — it's got your name on," said Ron.

Harry moved a little closer. Ron was pointing at one of the small glass spheres that glowed with a dull inner light, though it was very dusty and appeared not to have been touched for many years.

"My name?" said Harry blankly.

He stepped forward. Not as tall as Ron, he had to crane his neck to read the yellowish label affixed to the shelf right beneath the dusty glass ball. In spidery writing was written a date of some sixteen years previously, and below that:

S. P. T. to A. P. W. B. D.

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter

Harry stared at it.

“What is it?” Ron asked, sounding unnerved. “What’s your name doing down here?”

He glanced along at the other labels on that stretch of shelf.

“I’m not here,” he said, sounding perplexed. “None of the rest of us are here. . . .”

“Harry, I don’t think you should touch it,” said Hermione sharply, as he stretched out his hand.

“Why not?” he said. “It’s something to do with me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t, Harry,” said Neville suddenly. Harry looked around at him. Neville’s round face was shining slightly with sweat. He looked as though he could not take much more suspense.

“It’s got my name on,” said Harry.

And feeling slightly reckless, he closed his fingers around the dusty ball’s surface. He had expected it to feel cold, but it did not. On the contrary, it felt as though it had been lying in the sun for hours, as though the glow of light within was warming it. Expecting, even hoping, that something dramatic was going to happen, something exciting that might make their long and dangerous journey worthwhile after all, he lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The others moved in closer around Harry, gazing at the orb as he brushed it free of the clogging dust.

And then, from right behind them, a drawling voice said, “Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me.”