

# Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

## Chapter 10 - Luna Lovegood

Harry had a troubled nights sleep. His parents wove in and out of his dreams, never speaking; Mrs. Weasley sobbed over Kreachers dead body, watched by Ron and Hermione who were wearing crowns, and yet again Harry found himself walking down a corridor ending in a locked door. He awoke abruptly with his scar prickling to find Ron already dressed and talking to him.

'... better hurry up, Mum's going ballistic, she says we're going to miss the tram

There was a lot of commotion in the house. From what he heard as he dressed at top speed, Harry gathered that Fred and George had bewitched their trunks to fly downstairs to save the bother of carrying them, with the result that they had hurtled straight into Ginny and knocked her down two flights of stairs into the hall; Mrs. Black and Mrs. Weasley were both screaming at the top of their voices.

'- COULD HAVE DONE HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS -'

'- FILTHY HALF-BREEDS, BESMIRCHING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS -'

Hermione came hurrying into the room looking flustered, just as Harry was putting on his trainers. Hedwig was swaying on her shoulder, and she was carrying a squirming Crookshanks in her arms.

'Mum and Dad just sent Hedwig back.' The owl fluttered obligingly over and perched on top of her cage. 'Are you ready yet?'

'Nearly. Is Ginny all right?' Harry asked, shoving on his glasses.

'Mrs. Weasley's patched her up,' said Hermione. 'But now Mad-

Eye's complaining that we can't leave unless Sturgis Podmore's here, otherwise the guard will be one short.'

'Guard?' said Harry. 'We have to go to King's Cross with a guard?'

'You have to go to King's Cross with a guard,' Hermione corrected him.

'Why?' said Harry irritably. 'I thought Voldemort was supposed to be lying low, or are you telling me he's going to jump out from behind a dustbin to try and do me in?'

'I don't know, it's just what Mad-Eye says,' said Hermione distractedly, looking at her watch, 'but if we don't leave soon we're definitely going to miss the train...'

'WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!' Mrs. Weasley bellowed and Hermione jumped as though scalded and hurried out of the room. Harry seized Hedwig, stuffed her unceremoniously into her cage, and set off downstairs after Hermione, dragging his trunk.

Mrs. Black's portrait was howling with rage but nobody was bothering to close the curtains over her; all the noise in the hall was bound to rouse her again, anyway.

'Harry, you're to come with me and Tonks,' shouted Mrs. Weasley - over the repeated screeches of 'MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!' - 'Leave your trunk and your owl, Alastor's going to deal with the luggage... oh, for heaven's sake, Sinus, Dumbledore said no!'

A bear-like black dog had appeared at Harry's side as he was clambering over the various trunks cluttering the hall to get to Mrs. Weasley.

'Oh honestly...' said Mrs. Weasley despairingly. 'Well, on your own head be it!'

She wrenched open the front door and stepped out into the weak September sunlight. Harry and the dog followed her. The door slammed behind them and Mrs. Blacks screeches were cut off instantly.

'Where's Tonks?' Harry said, looking round as they went down the stone steps of number twelve,

which vanished the moment they reached the pavement.

'She's waiting for us just up here,' said Mrs. Weasley stiffly, averting her eyes from the lolloping black dog beside Harry.

An old woman greeted them on the corner. She had tightly curled grey hair and wore a purple hat shaped like a pork pie.

'Wotcher, Harry,' she said, winking. 'Better hurry up, hadn't we, Molly?' she added, checking her watch.

'I know, I know,' moaned Mrs. Weasley, lengthening her stride, 'but Mad-Eye wanted to wait for Sturgis... if only Arthur could have got us cars from the Ministry again... but Fudge won't let him borrow so much as an empty ink bottle these days... how Muggles can stand travelling without magic

But the great black dog gave a joyful bark and gambolled around them, snapping at pigeons and chasing its own tail. Harry couldn't help laughing. Sirius had been trapped inside for a very long time. Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips in an almost Aunt Petunia-ish way.

It took them twenty minutes to reach King's Cross on foot and nothing more eventful happened during that time than Sirius scaring a couple of cats for Harry's entertainment. Once inside the station they lingered casually beside the barrier between platforms nine and ten until the coast was clear, then each of them leaned against it in turn and fell easily through on to platform nine and three-quarters, where the Hogwarts Express stood belching sooty steam over a platform packed with departing students and their families. Harry inhaled the familiar smell and felt his spirits soar... he was really going back...

'I hope the others make it in time,' said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, staring behind her at the wrought-iron arch spanning the platform, through which new arrivals would come.

'Nice dog, Harry!' called a tall boy with dreadlocks.

'Thanks, Lee,' said Harry, grinning, as Sirius wagged his tail frantically.

'Oh good,' said Mrs. Weasley, sounding relieved, 'here's Alastor with the luggage, look...'

A porter's cap pulled low over his mismatched eyes, Moody came limping through the archway pushing a trolley loaded with their trunks.

'All OK,' he muttered to Mrs. Weasley and Tonks, 'don't think we were followed...'

Seconds later, Mr Weasley emerged on to the platform with Ron and Hermione. They had almost unloaded Moody's luggage trolley when Fred, George and Ginny turned up with Lupin.

'No trouble?' growled Moody.

'Nothing,' said Lupin.

'Til still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore,' said Moody, 'that's the second time he's not turned up in a week. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus.'

'Well, look after yourselves,' said Lupin, shaking hands all round. He reached Harry last and gave him a clap on the shoulder. 'You too. Harry. Be careful.'

'Yeah, keep your head down and your eyes peeled,' said Moody, shaking Harry's hand too. 'And don't forget, all of you - careful what you put in writing. If in doubt, don't put it in a letter at all.'

'It's been great meeting all of you,' said Tonks, hugging Hermione and Ginny 'We'll see you soon, I expect.'

A warning whistle sounded; the students still on the platform started hurrying on to the train.

'Quick, quick,' said Mrs. Weasley distractedly, hugging them at random and catching Harry twice. 'Write... be good... if you've forgotten anything we'll send it on... on to the train, now, hurry...'

For one brief moment, the great black dog reared on to its hind legs and placed its front paws on Harry's shoulders, but Mrs. Weasley shoved Harry away towards the train door, hissing, 'For heaven's

sake, act more like a dog, Sirius!'

'See you!' Harry called out of the open window as the train began to move, while Ron, Hermione and Ginny waved beside him. The figures of Tonks, Lupin, Moody and Mr and Mrs. Weasley shrank rapidly but the black dog was bounding alongside the window, wagging its tail; blurred people on the platform were laughing to see it chasing the train, then they rounded a bend, and Sirius was gone.

'He shouldn't have come with us,' said Hermione in a worried voice.

'Oh, lighten up,' said Ron, 'he hasn't seen daylight for months, poor bloke.'

'Well,' said Fred, clapping his hands together, 'can't stand around chatting all day, we've got business to discuss with Lee. See you later,' and he and George disappeared down the corridor to the right.

The train was gathering still more speed, so that the houses outside the window flashed past, and they swayed where they stood.

'Shall we go and find a compartment, then?' Harry asked.

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

'Er,' said Ron.

'We're - well - Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage,' Hermione said awkwardly.

Ron wasn't looking at Harry; he seemed to have become intensely interested in the fingernails on his left hand.

'Oh,' said Harry. 'Right. Fine.'

'I don't think we'll have to stay there all journey,' said Hermione quickly. 'Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.'

'Fine,' said Harry again. 'Well, I - I might see you later, then.'

'Yeah, definitely,' said Ron, casting a shifty, anxious look at Harry. 'It's a pain having to go down there, I'd rather - but we have to - I mean, I'm not enjoying it, I'm not Percy,' he finished defiantly.

'I know you're not,' said Harry and he grinned. But as Hermione and Ron dragged their trunks, Crookshanks and a caged Pigwidgeon off towards the engine end of the train, Harry felt an odd sense of loss. He had never travelled on the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

'Come on,' Ginny told him, 'if we get a move on we'll be able to save them places.'

'Right,' said Harry, picking up Hedwig's cage in one hand and the handle of his trunk in the other. They struggled off down the corridor, peering through the glass-panelled doors into the compartments they passed, which were already full. Harry could not help noticing that a lot of people stared back at him with great interest and that several of them nudged their neighbours and pointed him out. After he had met this behaviour in five consecutive carriages he remembered that the Daily Prophet had been telling its readers all summer what a lying show-off he was. He wondered dully whether the people now staring and whispering believed the stories.

In the very last carriage they met Neville Longbottom, Harry's fellow fifth-year Gryffindor, his round face shining with the effort of pulling his trunk along and maintaining a one-handed grip on his struggling toad, Trevor.

'Hi, Harry' he panted. 'Hi, Ginny... everywhere's full... I can't find a seat...'

'What are you talking about?' said Ginny, who had squeezed past Neville to peer into the compartment behind him. There's room in this one, there's only Loony Lovegood in here —'

Neville mumbled something about not wanting to disturb anyone.

'Don't be silly,' said Ginny, laughing, 'she's all right.'

She slid the door open and pulled her trunk inside. Harry and Neville followed.

'Hi, Luna,' said Ginny, 'is it OK if we take these seats?'

The girl beside the window looked up. She had straggly, waist-length, dirty blonde hair, very pale eyebrows and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look. Harry knew at once why Neville had chosen to pass this compartment by. The girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness. Perhaps it was the fact that she had stuck her wand behind her left ear for safekeeping, or that she had chosen to wear a necklace of Butterbeer corks, or that she was reading a magazine upside-down. Her eyes ranged over Neville and came to rest on Harry. She nodded.

'Thanks,' said Ginny, smiling at her.

Harry and Neville stowed the three trunks and Hedwig's cage in the luggage rack and sat down. Luna watched them over her upside-down magazine, which was called *The Quibbler*. She did not seem to need to blink as much as normal humans. She stared and stared at Harry, who had taken the seat opposite her and now wished he hadn't.

'Had a good summer, Luna?' Ginny asked.

'Yes,' said Luna dreamily, without taking her eyes off Harry. 'Yes, it was quite enjoyable, you know. You're Harry Potter,' she added.

'I know I am,' said Harry.

Neville chuckled. Luna turned her pale eyes on him instead.

'And I don't know who you are.'

'I'm nobody,' said Neville hurriedly.

'No you're not,' said Ginny sharply. 'Neville Longbottom - Luna Love good. Luna's in my year, but in Ravenclaw.'

'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure,' said Luna in a singsong voice.

She raised her upside-down magazine high enough to hide her face and fell silent. Harry and Neville looked at each other with their eyebrows raised. Ginny suppressed a giggle.

The train rattled onwards, speeding them out into open country. It was an odd, unsettled sort of day; one moment the carriage was full of sunlight and the next they were passing beneath ominously grey clouds.

'Guess what I got for my birthday?' said Neville.

'Another Remembrall?' said Harry, remembering the marble-like device Neville's grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his abysmal memory.

'No,' said Neville. 'I could do with one, though, I lost the old one ages ago... no, look at this...'

He dug the hand that was not keeping a firm grip on Trevor into his schoolbag and after a little bit of rummaging pulled out what appeared to be a small grey cactus in a pot, except that it was covered with what looked like boils rather than spines.

'*Mimulus mimbletonia*,' he said proudly.

Harry stared at the thing. It was pulsating slightly, giving it the rather sinister look of some diseased internal organ.

'It's really, really rare,' said Neville, beaming. 'I don't know if there's one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can't wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My Great Uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria. I'm going to see if I can breed from it.'

Harry knew that Neville's favourite subject was Herbology but for the life of him he could not see what he would want with this stunted little plant.

'Does it - er - do anything?' he asked.

'Loads of stuff!' said Neville proudly. 'It's got an amazing defensive mechanism. Here, hold Trevor for me...'

He dumped the toad into Harry's lap and took a quill from his schoolbag. Luna Lovegood's

popping eyes appeared over the top of her upside-down magazine again, to watch what Neville was doing. Neville held the *Mimulus mimbletonia* up to his eyes, his tongue between his teeth, chose his spot, and gave the plant a sharp prod with the tip of his quill.

Liquid squirted from every boil on the plant; thick, stinking, dark green jets of it. They hit the ceiling, the windows, and splattered Luna Lovegood's magazine; Ginny, who had flung her arms up in front of her face just in time, merely looked as though she was wearing a slimy green hat, but Harry, whose hands had been busy preventing Trevor's escape, received a faceful. It smelled like rancid manure.

Neville, whose face and torso were also drenched, shook his head to get the worst out of his eyes.

'S - sorry,' he gasped. 'I haven't tried that before... didn't realise it would be quite so... don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous,' he added nervously, as Harry spat a mouthful on to the floor.

At that precise moment the door of their compartment slid open.

'Oh... hello, Harry,' said a nervous voice. 'Urn... bad time?'

Harry wiped the lenses of his glasses with his Trevor-free hand. A very pretty girl with long, shiny black hair was standing in the doorway smiling at him: Cho Chang, the Seeker on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

'Oh... hi,' said Harry blankly.

'Urn...' said Cho. 'Well... just thought I'd say hello... bye then.'

Rather pink in the face, she closed the door and departed. Harry slumped back in his seat and groaned. He would have liked Cho to discover him sitting with a group of very cool people laughing their heads off at a joke he had just told; he would not have chosen to be sitting with Neville and Loony Lovegood, clutching a toad and dripping in Stinksap.

'Never mind,' said Ginny bracingly. 'Look, we can easily get rid of all this.' She pulled out her wand. 'Scourgify!'

The Stinksap vanished.

'Sorry,' said Neville again, in a small voice.

Ron and Hermione did not turn up for nearly an hour, by which time the food trolley had already gone by. Harry, Ginny and Neville had finished their pumpkin pasties and were busy swapping Chocolate Frog Cards when the compartment door slid open and they walked in, accompanied by Crookshanks and a shrilly hooting Pigwidgeon in his cage.

'I'm starving,' said Ron, stowing Pigwidgeon next to Hedwig, grabbing a Chocolate Frog from Harry and throwing himself into the seat next to him. He ripped open the wrapper, bit off the frog's head and leaned back with his eyes closed as though he had had a very exhausting morning.

'Well, there are two fifth-year prefects from each house,' said Hermione, looking thoroughly disgruntled as she took her seat. 'Boy and girl from each.'

'And guess who's a Slytherin prefect?' said Ron, still with his eyes closed.

'Malfoy,' replied Harry at once, certain his worst fear would be confirmed.

'Course,' said Ron bitterly, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth and taking another.

'And that complete cow Pansy Parkinson,' said Hermione viciously. 'How she got to be a prefect when she's thicker than a concussed troll...'

'Who are Hufflepuff's?' Harry asked.

'Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott,' said Ron thickly.

'And Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw,' said Hermione.

'You went to the Yule Ball with Padma Patil,' said a vague voice.

Everyone turned to look at Luna Lovegood, who was gazing unblinkingly at Ron over the top of

The Quibbler. He swallowed his mouthful of Frog.

'Yeah, I know I did,' he said, looking mildly surprised.

'She didn't enjoy it very much,' Luna informed him. 'She doesn't think you treated her very well, because you wouldn't dance with her. I don't think I'd have minded,' she added thoughtfully, 'I don't like dancing very much.'

She retreated behind The Quibbler again. Ron stared at the cover with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds, then looked around at Ginny for some kind of explanation, but Ginny had stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself giggling. Ron shook his head, bemused, then checked his watch.

'We're supposed to patrol the corridors every so often,' he told Harry and Neville, 'and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can't wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something

'You're not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!' said Hermione sharply.

'Yeah, right, because Malfoy won't abuse it at all,' said Ron sarcastically.

'So you're going to descend to his level?'

'No, I'm just going to make sure I get his mates before he gets mine.'

'For heaven's sake, Ron -'

Til make Goyle do lines, it'll kill him, he hates writing,' said Ron happily. He lowered his voice to Goyle's low grunt and, screwing up his face in a look of pained concentration, mimed writing in midair. 'I... must... not... look... like... a... baboon's... backside.'

Everyone laughed, but nobody laughed harder than Luna Lovegood. She let out a scream of mirth that caused Hedwig to wake up and flap her wings indignantly and Crookshanks to leap up into the luggage rack, hissing. Luna laughed so hard her magazine slipped out of her grasp, slid down her legs and on to the floor.

That was funny!

Her prominent eyes swam with tears as she gasped for breath, staring at Ron. Utterly nonplussed, he looked around at the others, who were now laughing at the expression on Ron's face and at the ludicrously prolonged laughter of Luna Lovegood, who was rocking backwards and forwards, clutching her sides.

'Are you taking the mickey?' said Ron, frowning at her.

'Baboon's... backside!' she choked, holding her ribs.

Everyone else was watching Luna laughing, but Harry glancing at the magazine on the floor, noticed something that made him dive for it. Upside-down it had been hard to tell what the picture on the front was, but Harry now realised it was a fairly bad cartoon of Cornelius Fudge; Harry only recognised him because of the lime-green bowler hat. One of Fudge's hands was clenched around a bag of gold; the other hand was throttling a goblin. The cartoon was captioned: How Far Will Fudge Go to Gain Gringotts?

Beneath this were listed the titles of other articles inside the magazine.

Corruption in the Quidditch League:

How the Tornados are Taking Control

Secrets of the Ancient Runes Revealed

Sirius Black: Villain or Victim?

'Can I have a look at this?' Harry asked Luna eagerly.

She nodded, still gazing at Ron, breathless with laughter.

Harry opened the magazine and scanned the index. Until this moment he had completely forgotten the magazine Kingsley had handed Mr Weasley to give to Sirius, but it must have been this edition of The Quibbler.

He found the page, and turned excitedly to the article.

This, too, was illustrated by a rather bad cartoon; in fact, Harry would not have known it was supposed to be Sirius if it hadn't been captioned. Sirius was standing on a pile of human bones with his wand out. The headline on the article said:

**SIRIUS - BLACK AS HE'S PAINTED?**

Notorious mass murderer or innocent singing sensation?

Harry had to read this first sentence several times before he was convinced that he had not misunderstood it. Since when had Sirius been a singing sensation?

For fourteen years Sirius Black has been believed guilty of the mass murder of twelve innocent Muggles and one wizard. Black's audacious escape from Azkaban two years ago has led to the widest manhunt ever conducted by the Ministry of Magic. None of us has ever questioned that he deserves to be recaptured and handed back to the Dementors.

**BUT DOES HE?**

Startling new evidence has recently come to light that Sirius

Black may not have committed the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban. In fact, says Doris Purkiss, of 18 Acanthia Way, Little Norton, Black may not even have been present at the killings.

'What people don't realise is that Sirius Black is a false name,' says Mrs. Purkiss. 'The man people believe to be Sirius Black is actually Stubby Boardman, lead singer of popular singing group The Hobgoblins, who retired from public life after being struck on the ear by a turnip at a concert in Little Norton Church Hall nearly fifteen years ago. I recognised him the moment I saw his picture in the paper. Now, Stubby couldn't possibly have committed those crimes, because on the day in question he happened to be enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner with me. I have written to the Minister for Magic and am expecting him to give Stubby, alias -Sirius, a full pardon any day now.'

Harry finished reading and stared at the page in disbelief. Perhaps it was a joke, he thought, perhaps the magazine often printed spoof Hems. He flicked back a few pages and found the piece on Fudge.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic, denied that he had any plans to take over the running of the Wizarding Bank, Gringotts, when he was elected Minister for Magic five years ago. Fudge has always insisted that he wants nothing more than to 'co-operate peacefully' with the guardians of our gold.

**BUT DOES HE?**

Sources close to the Minister have recently disclosed that Fudge's dearest ambition is to seize control of the goblin gold supplies and that he will not hesitate to use force if need be.

It wouldn't be the first time, either,' said a Ministry insider. 'Cornelius "Goblin-Crusher" Fudge, that's what his friends call him. If you could hear him when he thinks no one's listening, oh, he's always talking about the goblins he's had done in; he's had them drowned, he's had them dropped off buildings, he's had them poisoned, he's had them cooked in pies..."

Harry did not read any further. Fudge might have many faults but Harry found it extremely hard to imagine him ordering goblins to be cooked in pies. He flicked through the rest of the magazine. Pausing every few pages, he read: an accusation that the Tutshill Tornados were winning the Quidditch League by a combination of blackmail, illegal broom-tampering and torture; an interview with a wizard who claimed to have flown to the moon on a Cleansweep Six and brought back a bag of moon frogs to prove it; and an article on ancient runes which at least explained why Luna had been reading The Quibbler upside-down. According to the magazine, if you turned the runes on their heads they revealed a spell to make your enemy's ears turn into kumquats. In fact, compared to the rest of



the articles in The Quibbler, the suggestion that Sirius might really be the lead singer of The Hobgoblins was quite sensible.

'Anything good in there?' asked Ron as Harry closed the magazine.

'Of course not,' said Hermione scathingly, before Harry could answer. The Quibbler's rubbish, everyone knows that.'

'Excuse me,' said Luna; her voice had suddenly lost its dreamy quality. 'My father's the editor.'

'I - oh,' said Hermione, looking embarrassed. 'Well... it's got some interesting... I mean, it's quite...'

'I'll have it back, thank you,' said Luna coldly, and leaning forwards she snatched it out of Harry's hands. Ruffling through it to page fifty-seven, she turned it resolutely upside-down again and disappeared behind it, just as the compartment door opened for the third time.

Harry looked around; he had expected this, but that did not make the sight of Draco Malfoy smirking at him from between his cronies Crabbe and Goyle any more enjoyable-.

'What?' he said aggressively, before Malfoy could open his mouth.

'Manners, Potter, or I'll have to give you a detention,' drawled Malfoy, whose sleek blond hair and pointed chin were just like his fathers. 'You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments.'

'Yeah,' said Harry, 'but you, unlike me, -are a git, so get out and leave us alone.'

Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville laughed. Malfoy's lip curled.

'Tell me, how does it feel being second-best to Weasley, Potter?' he asked.

'Shut up, Malfoy,' said Hermione sharply.

'I seem to have touched a nerve,' said Malfoy, smirking. 'Well, just watch yourself, Potter, because I'll be dogging your footsteps in case you step out of line.'

'Get out!' said Hermione, standing up.

Sniggering, Malfoy gave Harry a last malicious look and departed, with Crabbe and Goyle lumbering along in his wake. Hermione slammed the compartment door behind them and turned to look at Harry, who knew at once that she, like him, had registered what Malfoy had said and been just as unnerved by it.

'Chuck us another Frog,' said Ron, who had clearly noticed nothing.

Harry could not talk freely in front of Neville and Luna. He exchanged another nervous look with Hermione, then stared out of the window.

He had thought Sirius coming with him to the station was a bit of a laugh, but suddenly it seemed reckless, if not downright dangerous... Hermione had been right... Sirius should not have come. What if Mr Malfoy had noticed the black dog and told Draco? What if he had deduced that the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks and Moody knew where Sirius was hiding? Or had Malfoy's use of the word 'dogging' been a coincidence?

The weather remained undecided as they travelled further and further north. Rain spattered the windows in a half-hearted way, then the sun put in a feeble appearance before clouds drifted over it once more. When darkness fell and lamps came on inside the carriages, Luna rolled up The Quibbler, put it carefully away in her bag and took to staring at everyone in the compartment instead.

Harry was sitting with his forehead pressed against the train window, trying to get a first distant glimpse of Hogwarts, but it was a moonless night and the rain-streaked window was grimy.

'We'd better change,' said Hermione at last, and all of them opened their trunks with difficulty and pulled on their school robes. She and Ron pinned their prefect badges carefully to their chests. Harry saw Ron checking his reflection in the black window.

At last, the train began to slow down and they heard the usual racket up and down it as everybody scrambled to get their luggage and pets assembled, ready to get off. As Ron and Hermione were supposed to supervise all this, they disappeared from the carriage again, leaving Harry and the others to look after Crookshanks and Pigwidgeon.

'Til carry that owl, if you like,' said Luna to Harry, reaching out for Pigwidgeon as Neville stowed Trevor carefully in an inside pocket.

'Oh - er - thanks,' said Harry, handing her the cage and hoisting Hedwig's more securely into his arms.

They shuffled out of the compartment feeling the first sting of the night air on their faces as they joined the crowd in the corridor. Slowly, they moved towards the doors. Harry could smell the pine trees that lined the path down to the lake. He stepped down on to the platform and looked around, listening for the familiar call of 'firs'-years over 'ere... firs'-years...'

But it did not come. Instead, a quite different voice, a brisk female one, was calling out, "First-years line up over here, please! All first-years to me!"

A lantern came swinging towards Harry and by its light he saw the prominent chin and severe haircut of Professor Grubbly-Plank, the witch who had taken over Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures lessons for a while the previous year.

'Where's Hagrid?' he said out loud.

'I don't know,' said Ginny, 'but we'd better get out of the way, we're blocking the door.'

'Oh, yeah...'

Harry and Ginny became separated as they moved off along the platform and out through the station. Jostled by the crowd, Harry squinted through the darkness for a glimpse of Hagrid; he had to be here, Harry had been relying on it - seeing Hagrid again was one of the things he'd been looking forward to most. But there was no sign of him.

He can't have left, Harry told himself as he shuffled slowly through a narrow doorway on to the road outside with the rest of the crowd. He's just got a cold or something...

He looked around for Ron or Hermione, wanting to know what they thought about the reappearance of Professor Grubbly-Plank, but neither of them was anywhere near him, so he allowed himself to be shunted forwards on to the dark rain-washed road outside Hogsmeade Station.

Here stood the hundred or so horseless stagecoaches that always took the students above first year up to the castle. Harry glanced quickly at them, turned away to keep a lookout for Ron and Hermione, then did a double-take.

The coaches were no longer horseless. There were creatures standing between the carriage shafts. If he had had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither - vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the gathering gloom, the creatures looked eerie and sinister. Harry could not understand why the coaches were being pulled by these horrible horses when they were quite capable of moving along by themselves.

'Where's Pig?' said Ron's voice, right behind Harry.

'That Luna girl was carrying him,' said Harry, turning quickly, eager to consult Ron about Hagrid. 'Where d'you reckon -'

'- Hagrid is? I dunno,' said Ron, sounding worried. 'He'd better be OK...'

A short distance away, Draco Malfoy, followed by a small gang of cronies including Crabbe,

Goyle and Pansy Parkinson, was pushing some timid-looking second-years out of the way so that he and his friends could get a coach to themselves. Seconds later, Hermione emerged panting from the crowd.

'Malfoy was being absolutely foul to a first-year back there. I swear I'm going to report him, he's only had his badge three minutes and he's using it to bully people worse than ever... where's Crookshanks?'

'Ginny's got him,' said Harry. There she is...'

Ginny had just emerged from the crowd, clutching a squirming Crookshanks.

Thanks,' said Hermione, relieving Ginny of the cat. 'Come on, let's get a carriage together before they all fill up...'

'I haven't got Pig yet!' Ron said, but Hermione was already heading off towards the nearest unoccupied coach. Harry remained behind with Ron.

'What are those things, d'you reckon?' he asked Ron, nodding at the horrible horses as the other students surged past them.

'What things?'

Those horse -'

Luna appeared holding Pigwidgeon's cage in her arms; the tiny owl was twittering excitedly as usual.

'Here you are,' she said. 'He's a sweet little owl, isn't he?'

'Er... yeah... he's all right,' said Ron gruffly. 'Well, come on then, let's get in... what were you saying, Harry?'

'I was saying, what are those horse things?' Harry said, as he, Ron and Luna made for the carriage in which Hermione and Ginny were already sitting.

'What horse things?'

The horse things pulling the carriages!' said Harry impatiently. They were, after all, about three feet from the nearest one; it was watching them with empty white eyes. Ron, however, gave Harry a perplexed look.

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about - look!'

Harry grabbed Ron's arm and wheeled him about so that he was face to face with the winged horse. Ron stared straight at it for a second, then looked back at Harry.

'What am I supposed to be looking at?'

'At the - there, between the shafts! Harnessed to the coach! It's right there in front -'

But as Ron continued to look bemused, a strange thought occurred to Harry.

'Can't... can't you see them?'

'See what?'

'Can't you see what's pulling the carriages?'

Ron looked seriously alarmed now.

'Are you feeling all right, Harry?'

'I... yeah...'

Harry felt utterly bewildered. The horse was there in front of him, gleaming solidly in the dim light issuing from the station windows behind them, vapour rising from its nostrils in the chilly night air. Yet, unless Ron was faking - and it was a very feeble joke if he was - Ron could not see it at all.

'Shall we get in, then?' said Ron uncertainly, looking at Harry as though worried about him.

'Yeah,' said Harry. 'Yeah, go on...'

'It's all right,' said a dreamy voice from beside Harry as Ron vanished into the coach's dark interior. 'You're not going mad or anything. I can see them, too.'

'Can you?' said Harry desperately, turning to Luna. He could see the bat-winged horses reflected in her wide silvery eyes.

'Oh, yes,' said Luna, 'I've been able to see them ever since my first day here. They've always pulled the carriages. Don't worry. You're just as sane as I am:

Smiling faintly, she climbed into the musty interior of the carriage after Ron. Not altogether reassured, Harry followed her.