



## THE FORBIDDEN FOREST



can never die. Mr. Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

"The Sorcerer's Stone! Of course — the Elixir of Life! But I don't understand who —"

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry's heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: "Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die."

"Do you mean," Harry croaked, "that was *Vol* —"

"Harry! Harry, are you all right?"

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along behind her.

"I'm fine," said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying. "The unicorns dead, Hagrid, it's in that clearing back there."

"This is where I leave you," Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. "You are safe now."

Harry slid off his back.

"Good luck, Harry Potter," said Firenze. "The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leaving Harry shivering behind him.

Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when



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Harry roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

"Snape wants the Stone for Voldemort . . . and Voldemort's waiting in the forest . . . and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich. . . ."

"Stop saying the name!" said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done so. . . . Bane was furious . . . he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen. . . . They must show that Voldemort's coming back. . . . Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me. . . . I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

"*Will you stop saying the name!*" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone," Harry went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off. . . . Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of comfort.

"Harry, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went



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to bed exhausted, their throats sore. But the night's surprises weren't over.

When Harry pulled back his sheets, he found his Invisibility Cloak folded neatly underneath them. There was a note pinned to it:

*Just in case.*

## C H A P T E R   S I X T E E N



### THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR

**I**n years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox — points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

## ★ ★ THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR ★ ★

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because Harry couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows.