

Her arms were a vice grip around Harry's waist, but he ignored it, focusing on guiding Buckbeak up to the correct window. "He's there!" Harry reached over, knocking on the glass firmly. Sirius, slumped inside the office, sat up in shock. He scrambled to his feet, hurrying over to the window. Hermione raised her wand, unlocking it with a spell, and Sirius wrenched it open.

"Harry!" he gasped, stunned. "*How?*"

"Get on, there's not much time," Harry urged, shifting Buckbeak forward slightly so Sirius could climb on behind Hermione. "The dementors are coming."

Still gaping, Sirius hauled himself through the window and onto Buckbeak's back. Hermione locked the window once more, leaving it as if it had never been touched.

With everyone secure, Harry dug his heels in and guided Buckbeak all the way to the top of the West Tower. They landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off. "Sirius, you'd better leave, now. They'll notice you're gone any minute now."

"What about the others? Is everyone alright?" Sirius asked urgently. Harry shook his head; he needed to move!

"Everyone's fine, now *go!*"

"I'll write you," Sirius promised. "I'll figure something out. This isn't goodbye, Harry." He leaned down from the hippogriff, pressing his forehead to Harry's for the briefest moment. "*Thank you.*"

For a moment, Harry thought about jumping back on Buckbeak and flying off with Sirius to who-knew-where. Away from Hogwarts, away from Dumbledore. Freedom.

But he couldn't. His friends needed him.

Instead, he stepped back to watch Sirius nudge the huge beast forward, Buckbeak's wings stretching wide as he launched himself off the battlements and into the sky. Hermione tugged on his arm. "We have to get moving, quickly!"

Harry wrenched his gaze away, allowing Hermione to drag him down the steps and back into the castle. Sirius would be fine, he told himself. He had to be.

Luckily, the West Tower wasn't too far from the hospital wing, and after a near-miss with Fudge in the hallway, they made it back to the doors just as Dumbledore was excusing himself from the ward. He smiled benevolently at them. Harry refused to meet his gaze. "All done, then?" Harry and Hermione both nodded. Dumbledore's smile widened. "Excellent. And I think—" He cocked his head, listening through the door, "— yes, I think you've gone too. Quickly, now." He ushered them back into the hospital wing, and the lock clicked behind them.

They'd done it.